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Forced Labour in the Global Economy

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Short Course | Volume 2



Edited by Genevieve LeBaron and Neil Howard

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Volume Two

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Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Supporters



About Beyond Trafficking and Slavery

A wide range of activists, academics, trade unions, governments and NGOs are currently trying to understand and address forced labour, trafficking and slavery. *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* (BTS) occupies a unique position within this larger movement, one which combines the rigour of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism and the immediacy of political activism. It is an independent, not-for-profit marketplace of ideas that uses evidence-based advocacy to tackle the political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation, vulnerability and forced labour. It provides original analysis and specialised knowledge on these issues to take public understanding beyond the sensationalism of many mainstream media depictions. It further works to bring citizens, activists, scholars and policy-makers into conversation with each other to imagine pioneering policy responses.

BTS is housed within [openDemocracy](#), a UK-based digital commons with an annual readership of over nine million. OpenDemocracy is committed to filling gaps in global media coverage, helping alternative views and perspectives find their voices, and converting trailblazing thinking into lasting, meaningful change.



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Forced labour in the global economy

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery editors introduce this volume, which explores the political economic contexts of slavery, trafficking and forced labour, and examines global efforts to confront their root causes.

Genevieve LeBaron and Neil Howard

There is a growing and sober awareness among international organisations and some advocacy groups that trafficking, slavery and forced labour are not anomalies perpetuated by a few ‘bad apple’ employers. Rather, severe labour exploitation is an endemic feature of the contemporary global economy. From slavery and trafficking in the [production of shrimp in Thailand](#) to [artisanal cheese and clothing](#) made by US prison labour, forced labour plays a significant role in commodity production, as well as care, domestic, and sex work. The need to address forced labour more systematically has been emphasised recently in the rise of calls to [tackle ‘root causes’](#).

Yet what actually are these root causes? How do they operate? Beyond the commonplace notion that ‘poverty’ renders workers vulnerable to abuse, or that this abuse constitutes ‘[the underside of globalisation](#)’, what do we actually know about the specific ways in which the structure of the global economy conditions both poverty and severe labour exploitation?

We take as starting points two basic premises: 1) poverty and globalisation are indeed fundamental for the rise and proliferation of seriously exploitative labour; 2) we need to go beyond these abstractions if we’re to generate sophisticated understandings of how and why.

In doing so, it might be useful to borrow a metaphor from classical economics—that of *supply and demand*. We contend that under certain circumstances, policies that impoverish people, as well as policies

that heighten their dependence on money and markets for subsistence, create a *supply* of workers vulnerable to serious exploitation. At the same time, the pressures of capitalist globalisation as well as the dynamics of particular industries generate a *business demand* for their labour. However, given that not all poor people are trafficked, and that not all businesses deploy forced labour, which factors specifically lead these lines of supply and demand to intersect?

Our first group of essays lays out the big picture of forced labour in the global economy. Nicola Phillips kicks us off by interrogating some troubling but common assumptions about poverty and vulnerability to forced labour, arguing that those who are most exploited are often *not* the most destitute. As she points out, poverty-as-vulnerability is not reducible to income. Rather, it involves education, opportunity, access to services, migrant rights, gender justice, and other factors.

Marcus Taylor highlights another crucial driver of forced labour in the global economy: climate change. He argues that drought and scarcity drive many small-hold farmers into cycles of debt and bonded labour, thereby intensifying the relational webs of dispossession and domination that permeate caste and class in India. Both authors flag the need for policy to incorporate nuanced understandings of how macro political economic dynamics like poverty and climate change generate a 'supply' of people vulnerable to labour exploitation, which can include forced labour, trafficking, and slavery.

Linking the growing supply of vulnerable workers to business' demand for it, Kendra Strauss focuses our attention on an increasingly large and powerful group of recruiters and employers called 'labour market intermediaries.' These brokers often profit from workers' vulnerability at bottom end of the labour market, sometimes through business models deliberately configured around practices of human trafficking and forced labour. David McNally and Sue Ferguson take this discussion further by identifying the role of wealthy states' labour market

and immigration policies in facilitating employers' use of bonded and unfree labour. They flag the neoliberal rollback of social protection and privatisation of the means of subsistence as root causes of forced labour, insofar as these trends have undermined the freedom of poor workers to say 'no' to exploitative jobs.

Our second group examines how, within the context of these macro trends, sector specific dynamics can also generate a demand for forced labour. Genevieve LeBaron begins this section with a call for more serious government regulation of global supply chains. The subsequent articles look at the specifics of three individual economic sectors. Sébastien Rioux looks at retail-driven food supply chains; Alessandra Mezzadri analyses the role of labour unfreedom in the global garment industry; and Ben Richardson examines the production of sugar. Each of these pieces fleshes out the previous reflections on *supply* with a corresponding analysis of *demand*.

Discussions of demand in the age of the 'global factory' inevitably require reflections on *supply chains*, the price-setting power of lead firms, the violent battle for profit along supply chains, and the ways in which supply-chain dynamics create space for, or even require, severe worker exploitation. Rioux begins this discussion with a piece on the monopsony of global food retailers, while Richardson's article reveals how modern firms producing for global value chains draw on management techniques developed in slave times, including forced labour.

The next group of essays deepens the discussion of global supply chains, and turns attention to existing policy responses. Some articles look at the particularities of expanding efforts to tackle forced labour in global supply-chains, while others address global governance initiatives more broadly. A common theme running throughout this analysis is the chronic insufficiency of contemporary efforts to come to grips with the nuances of global exploitation, or to address the 'root causes' with which we began our reflections.

Benjamin Selwyn's article argues that increasingly complex global supply chains are not technical and benign business innovations, but rather are tools to accelerate domination and surplus extraction from workers. So long as initiatives to 'slavery-proof' supply chains fail to incorporate this insight, they will be inadequate. Fabiola Mieres and Siobhán McGrath echo this stance, documenting the limitations of corporate self-governance and the industry of 'risk mitigation', while Andreas Rühmkorf laments deficiencies in existing legal frameworks to hold multinational companies responsible for forced labour in their supply chains. Kate McDonald and Christian Barry highlight the pitfalls of relying on consumers to generate ethical labour practices.

In our closing group of essays, Joel Quirk and André Broome take aim at the politics of global benchmarking that characterise latter-day 'modern slavery' abolitionism. Rather than genuinely addressing worker exploitation, they argue, the NGO strategy of benchmarking seems more focused on establishing organisational credentials and brand recognition within a competitive charity marketplace. Jens Lerche, while not levelling accusations of bad faith against the International Labour Organisation, still criticises the UN's 'labour arm' for its counterproductive reformism and lack of political courage when seeking to represent the world's workers. Rachel Wilshaw urges us to take a holistic view of the governance challenges surrounding forced labour, including inequality and corporate power, while Neil Howard argues that unconditional basic income could be used as an effective anti-slavery strategy since it could eliminate economic vulnerability.

Finally, we (Genevieve LeBaron and Neil Howard) wrap up the volume with a closing essay, drawing key lessons across the arguments and evidence put forward for policy, activism, and future research.



Section one

Forced labour in the world

What has forced labour to do with poverty?

Income-based measures of poverty are unreliable for determining who is vulnerable to forced labour. More nuanced understandings of vulnerability are required to effectively reduce forced labour in the global economy.

Nicola Phillips

Who is vulnerable to forced labour, and why? If you asked a random sample of people this question, whether they were well-informed about forced labour or otherwise, many would immediately mention poverty. And they would be right to do so. Intuitively it seems obvious that people who live in conditions of chronic and dire economic need are most vulnerable to the various means by which people are ensnared and exploited in conditions of forced labour around the world.

Available research confirms this intuition. We know from [recent estimates](#) that forced labour is located most prevalently—but not exclusively—in relatively poorer regions, such as South Asia, and in poorer parts of countries. A [study](#) in Pakistan found that 66 percent of rural households in lower Sindh Province lived in conditions of extreme poverty, and almost all of these were bonded sharecroppers and labourers. [Household surveys](#) in India also show that those with higher levels of income are less likely to use or sell the labour of their children.

In reality, though, the picture is not quite that simple. Few studies exist on the links between forced labour and poverty in the global economy, but what little we know suggests they are more complex and varied than we often think. My co-researchers and I, for instance, have focused on Brazil. We recently analysed data on more than 21,000 people released from slavery-like conditions—the vocabulary favoured in Brazil and used in the relevant legislation—in the agricultural sector between 2003 and 2010. We connected that information with our conversations with both workers and people involved in Brazil's extensive



Canecutters in Brazil. Cícero R. C. Omena/Flickr. Creative Commons.

anti-slavery programme. One of our most arresting findings was that the people most likely to work in slavery-like conditions tended not to be the poorest of the poor.

Instead, they tended to fall into the category of the ‘working poor’. These are people across the world who exist above the extreme poverty line of \$1.25 per day, usually at or slightly below (but sometimes above) minimum wage levels. In fact, worldwide the number of people living between the \$1.25 and \$2 per day poverty lines—the classifications used by the World Bank—doubled between 1981 and 2008. It is no coincidence that our research found indicators of profound vulnerability to forced labour in this category, including in Brazilian agriculture.

The additional reason for this pattern of vulnerability is simple: recruiters and employers in agriculture are looking for workers—most often young men in the 18-34 age bracket—who have the physical condition necessary to endure the most intense forms of manual labour. They are not looking for the chronically malnourished and destitute.

Our research also revealed that two factors were more important than income poverty levels in this context. The first was education: in the data we analysed, fully 68 percent of the workers either were illiterate or had no more than four years of schooling. The second was economic insecurity, where the availability of work is erratic and income is precarious. In other words, the key is the insecurity and unpredictability of income, not the overall level of income.

In other settings, the picture is different. Most victims of trafficking for forced labour to (or in) countries like the UK are again not the extremely poor, but rarely are they the least educated either. Research on global migration patterns helps explain why this is the case. The poorest of the poor are the least mobile because they lack the resources to move. The propensity to migrate increases with education, yet migrant workers often end up in occupations well below their [level of education](#) and [qualifications](#).

So, because trafficking situations often begin with an individual's decision to migrate, it is safe to assume that victims of trafficking often fit this profile. They may be relatively poor, or relatively less educated, but it is not unheard of that they may have university degrees. In these scenarios, the sources of vulnerability might instead be a lack of employment opportunities or decent wages, alongside a wide range of other forms of social and personal deprivation.

What does all this tell us, and why does it matter? It tells us that forced labour is deeply connected to poverty, but understanding poverty in terms of income—and particularly focusing on extreme poverty and destitution—can often be a highly unreliable guide to who is most vulnerable, and why.

Poverty has many other dimensions: education, opportunity, access to services and social safety nets, rights for women and girls, access to decent work and wages, and a host of other 'human development' issues.

Which of these are most tightly connected to patterns of slavery varies in different contexts and for different groups of people.

This matters because effective policy responses depend on understanding these variations. There are calls for forced labour to be better integrated into national and international poverty reduction strategies. This must happen, as the inclusion of forced labour in national legislation and priorities is an indispensable prerequisite to addressing forced labour and slavery in the global economy. In doing so, however, we must shift the focus away from income measures and extreme poverty, thereby opening up poverty reduction strategies to more nuanced and accurate understandings of vulnerability and forced labour. Social protection policies aimed at the lowest-income households are unlikely to make a significant positive impact on many workers' vulnerability to forced labour. Indeed, such policies may end up having the opposite effect, increasing the vulnerability of workers by letting them slip through social safety nets and become more dependent on highly exploitative work. The more effective strategies in this scenario may relate to education, skills and labour market policies.

The challenge—and it is a big one for both research and policy—is to figure out which forms of poverty, in which contexts, make people most vulnerable to forced labour, and to work out appropriate strategies on that basis. Yet again, one size does not fit all.

Forced labour under a changing climate: droughts and debt in semi-arid India

Climatic change compounds the vulnerabilities and dependencies existing between households in semi-arid South Asia. To avoid more coerced labour, public policy must address the root causes of such vulnerability.

Marcus Taylor

With high levels of poverty and endemic food insecurity, agrarian regions of South Asia are often argued to be **uniquely vulnerable to contemporary climate change**. This has led to repeated calls for an urgent process of ‘climate change adaptation’ in which climatic threats can be mitigated and new opportunities seized. Although the need to adapt may seem self-evidently necessary, much of the current policy debate tends to gloss over a troubling facet of contemporary climatic change. Not only are different social groups unequally affected by climatic trends, but also the security of some social groups is often directly tied to the insecurity of others. This thorny issue is often not addressed in official discourse, yet it is particularly clear in agrarian environments in South Asia, where relationships of debt, dependency and forced labour are key mechanisms through which marginal groups experience climatic change.

Relational vulnerability

To grasp these social dynamics, we must focus on the ways in which subordinate groups are incorporated into what I term ‘relational vulnerability’—a situation in which the relative security of some and the relative vulnerability of others are directly linked and are reproduced over time.

The roots of such relational vulnerability in rural regions are often found in the uneven access to key productive assets. For example, in

order to engage in agricultural production, smallholder households must have access to land, water, credit, labour, seeds, fertiliser, pesticides, mechanical equipment and technical knowledge. These assets are frequently held by other actors—local landowners, moneylenders, traders, input dealers, labour contractors, agribusiness representatives, local politicians and agricultural outreach officers—upon whom marginal households become dependent.

Embedded within divisions of class, caste and gender, these dependencies frequently facilitate an ongoing transfer of resources between groups through longstanding debt relations, unequal exchanges and the rendering of underpaid services, including coerced labour. Subordinate households are therefore rendered vulnerable not simply due to a lack of assets, but *because they are fundamentally dependent on other social actors to secure their livelihoods*.

Debt and vulnerability in a changing climate

As an example of how relational vulnerability interacts with climatic change, consider the severe drought that afflicted semi-arid areas of south-central India across the winter and spring of 2012-13. During this period, severely deficient rainfall led to the drying up of fields and wells across Anantapur district in southwest Andhra Pradesh and Dharwad district in neighbouring Karnataka.

One troubling outcome of this agrarian distress was an extreme shortage of fodder for cattle. This scarcity left local smallholders that had invested significant money in livestock—often by taking on sizeable debts with local moneylenders—unable to feed their animals. Without access to fodder, smallholders witnessed a key element of their asset base starving to death before their eyes.

In response, smallholders began to sell their cattle *en masse*. The resulting distress sales opened up new accumulation strategies for local merchants and landlords, who quickly bought up large amounts of

cattle from individual smallholders and transported them to cattle markets found in Chennai and Hyderabad. Through their control of capital, credit and transportation, merchants were reportedly making profits of IR 5,000 (US\$80) per animal while smallholders were losing a significant part of their asset base.

Simultaneous to this shakedown of smallholders by livestock merchants, a market for water rapidly emerged as farmers and villages continued to wilt under the drought. For those who had the capital to drill deep wells, water could be extracted from dwindling underground aquifers and sold to those neighbours with no such access. By monopolising water, a new entrepreneurial class emerged to service local villages at extortionate prices through a network of roaming water tankers. *The Deccan Chronicle* quotes Ramesh, an autorickshaw driver, on the dynamics of this socially constructed scarcity:

We don't have an option but to buy water from these private tankers. My family needs about ten pots of water every day, Rs 50 for drinking water alone. The tankers know how to do business—they come once every three days to our village.

As one political leader interviewed by veteran journalist P. Sainath put it: “If I owned ten tankers, I'd have to pray for drought this year, too”. Given that drought is predicted to occur with greater frequency and intensity across these regions, such adaptation entrepreneurs appear to be exceedingly well positioned to cash in.

Together, these examples indicate how drought can re-establish the long-term vulnerability of smallholders and their dependence on other social classes. Those unable to access water, grow crops, find employment or replace lost assets are faced with new pressures to take on further debts advanced by moneylenders, landowners, commercial microfinance institutions or labour contractors. Many households

already hold [considerable debts](#) that need to be continually serviced, and escalating debt levels threaten a further loss of social dignity and greater dependence upon those well-placed to take advantage of their vulnerability.

Selling oneself into bonded labour for the season is one method of dealing with such vulnerability that remains common for the extreme poor across these regions, particularly with [the current winding down of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(MGNREGA\)](#). For those in debt traps, entering a bonded labour relationship appears as a temporary salve to immediate woes because the seller receives a fixed payment of advanced wages up front that can be used to pay servicing on pressing household debts. Access to this hard cash, however, comes at the cost of being tied to an employment relationship that is arduous, extremely low paid, and that serves to consolidate the processes of dependency over time. On the other side, employers profit from the production of cheap labourers while middlemen and moneylenders reap considerable rents from ensuing cycles of over-indebtedness and repeated bondage. This is relational vulnerability in its most abrasive form.

Troublingly, these are precisely the type of socio-ecological relations through which climatic change will express itself across much of semi-arid South Asia. Finding ways to ensure that marginal households have the [resources and security](#) to avoid such debt traps should be the centrepiece of any meaningful adaptation policy.

The role of market intermediaries in driving forced and unfree labour

There has been lots of talk about multinational corporations' responsibility for fuelling forced labour. But what about the labour market intermediaries who recruit and supply vulnerable workers to these firms?

Kendra Strauss

In many people's minds, words like trafficking and modern slavery are associated with sexual exploitation, especially of women and children. As the [International Labour Organisation](#) has highlighted, however, the majority of the estimated 21 million victims of 'modern slavery' worldwide are exploited for their labour. In diverse sectors including agriculture, food processing, manufacturing, construction and domestic work, vulnerable workers are subject to coercion that is often exacerbated by the lack of a direct employment relation. In other words, from agricultural labour gangs to subcontracted workers in factories, labour intermediaries play a role in creating a hyper-flexible workforce. In the broadest sense, and in human relations theory, labour intermediaries are individuals or organisations that stand between a worker and the firm or entity that requires labour. They act as brokers to fill jobs and they 'lease' labour (in the case of temporary workers) to companies seeking flexibility. However, as research in sectors like [horticulture](#) has shown, labour intermediaries or contractors are key players in forced labour situations.

The problem is that this reality clashes with the approaches of most governments towards labour intermediaries. Since the mid-1980s, the trend has been acceptance and deregulation of markets for temp workers. I first became interested in the UK's [Gangmaster Licensing Authority](#) (GLA), which was established to regulate labour brokers and recruiters—still called gangmasters in Britain—after the tragic drowning of 24 undocumented Chinese cockle pickers at Morecambe

Bay in 2004, because it represented a rare tightening of regulations. The tragedy had spurred the government to finally increase oversight of labour intermediaries in the agriculture, horticulture, food processing and shellfish gathering sectors, but in *only* those areas. The GLA legislation implicitly recognised the particular vulnerability of migrant workers. However, it stopped short of increasing oversight of labour contractors in all sectors characterised by what the geographer Jane Wills has called the “migrant division of labour.” When I moved back to my home country of Canada from the UK last year, the UK was in the process of debating its new [Modern Slavery Bill](#). A major concern of migrants’ and workers’ advocates was the role of the GLA, which was being forced to do more despite budget cuts, while it was also being touted as a possible model for regulation in other sectors.

The relationship between unfree labour, intermediation (indirect employment) and the private economy is a key dimension of the problem of forced labour that governments often choose to ignore in their desire to foster flexible labour markets. Yet not all states and authorities respond in the same way. In 2014 Professor Judy Fudge and I published a co-edited book, [*Temporary Work, Agencies and Unfree Labour: Insecurity in the New World of Work*](#), which brought together researchers from law and the social sciences to consider the links between temporary agency work and unfree labour in contemporary economies. Our core argument was that:

evidence suggests that ‘sweating’ at the bottom end of the labour market (increasingly populated by migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, in many countries) often involves labour intermediaries who exploit the ways in which processes of racialisation and the construction of new categories of social difference, instigated by immigration regimes, render some workers extremely vulnerable—including to forced and unfree labour.

Labour intermediaries, in other words, are key to the construction and exploitation of especially migrant workers' vulnerability to forms of unfree and forced labour. This does not happen by accident, or because of some neutral 'law' of the market. It happens because of the way labour markets and work relations are constructed: understood, talked about, regulated or left unregulated.

A key problem is that labour intermediaries take diverse forms. Some are large, well-known international temp employment agencies. Others are individual recruiters, single links within extensive chains of labour contracting in global value chains and production networks. In the case of undocumented workers, there may be blurry lines between people smugglers, traffickers and recruiters. Neat categorical distinctions between labour and sexual exploitation also break down. Vulnerable workers, often but not only women and children, may be coerced into situations that involve unfree wage labour, sex work, or situations that combine unfree wage labour with sexual exploitation. For example, migrant domestic workers who take out loans to enable them to migrate may be more vulnerable to labour trafficking, but also to sexual exploitation or coerced sex work, because they are 'working off what they owe' to an intermediary. In all cases migrants' immigration status compounds the relationship we identify in the book between temporary and intermediated employment and precarious work (a fact which is well documented by others). The GLA implicitly recognises this relationship, focusing as it does on sectors that are heavily dependent on low-paid migrant labour. That said, it is limited by a whole range of factors, including a narrow sectoral focus, limited resources and the idea that it should not create regulatory burdens on employers.

Upon my return to Canada, I noted that the regulation of intermediaries, including immigration consultants, was again a major issue of concern and contention. Trafficking and, to a lesser extent, forced labour have climbed the political agenda but the focus has been some-

what different than in the UK. Canada has no stand-alone forced labour or slavery offences on the books, and the debate is almost entirely dominated by sex trafficking. Priding itself on being a country with a positive history of multiculturalism, the large and growing role of temporary migration programmes has been causing controversy. Indeed, accusations were levelled in the summer of 2014 that the Temporary Foreign Worker Programme (TFWP) was [taking jobs away from Canadian workers](#). The Live-in Caregiver Programme, part of the TFWP which predominantly recruits female workers from the Philippines to work as nannies and carers in Canadian households, has long been critiqued by activists for requiring women to ‘mortgage their futures’ for the chance to settle in Canada. This occurs not (or not only) because of the nature of the programme itself, but because of the high fees paid to recruiters and immigration consultants in order to secure positions. Similar problems are found in the fast-growing and newly reformed Temporary Foreign Worker Programme. *Fees, debts and webs of obligation (enmeshing families and communities) result in de facto bonded labour or indentured labour.*

These issues have generated some recent debate in Canada, including among activists, advocates and politicians seeking progressive reforms to these programmes. Such debate often centres on competing regimes of regulation for intermediaries of various kinds, including the much-lauded Manitoba model that Judy and her co-author Daniel Parrot write about in the book. The Manitoba model addresses the exorbitant—and illegal—placement fees charged to temporary foreign workers, who are increasingly recognised as important to the province’s economy, by holding employers legally responsible for their reimbursement. This has led to a rise in direct recruitment. The system also encompasses a licensing mechanism for foreign recruiters. The Manitoba model is now being promoted in British Columbia, the province contrasted (unfavourably) with Manitoba in the book, as a solution to recurrent problems of exploitation by recruiters and immigration consultants.

This model is held up as a source of emulation in part because it seeks to control and regulate the recruitment process, rather than to hide behind claims that jurisdictional issues (migrant workers are recruited outside of Canada) make this an impossible task. *It also disrupts the notion that intermediaries are an essential cog in the temporary migration wheel*; that is, that employers will not be able to recruit migrant workers without using labour intermediaries. It is not sector specific, in contrast to the GLA, and thus prevents exploitative intermediaries from simply targeting workers in other sectors, such as home care and hospitality.

Yet although these steps are encouraging, we need to be aware that tackling intermediaries, while vital in the context of existing migration and labour market regimes, does not address the root causes of migrant vulnerability: racialisation, precarious migrant status, and labour markets that prioritise flexibility and profits over workers' rights. Forced labour and labour trafficking occur at the nexus of these dimensions of vulnerability. Until we recognise these problems with labour markets, and with relations of production more broadly, the hope of regulating extreme labour exploitation out of existence is likely to remain unrealised.

Capitalism's unfree global workforce

Neoliberal migration and border regimes create a de facto forced labour regime. Migration is increasingly key to providing capital's precarious workforce, but unfree labour has long been central to global capitalism.

Susan Ferguson and David McNally

Obscured by rhetoric about free markets, new forms of bonded labour have proliferated in recent decades. The millions of precarious migrant workers toiling in homes, fields, hotels and construction sites are just the latest version of a centuries-long process that has seen tens of millions of dispossessed people transplanted to labour in mines, on plantations and railway projects, and in sweatshop industries. From the seizure and sale of twelve million Africans for transport to the Americas to the so-called 'coolie system' that, starting in the 1880s, saw at least seventeen million Indians and other Asians pressed into bonded labour, poor people from outside the heartlands of capitalism have persistently fuelled modern industry and commerce. But the Second World War and the human rights regime that emerged during the 1940s and 1950s was supposed to have changed all that, explicitly banning forced labour in various international charters, and enshrining basic rights along with paths to citizenship in 'host' countries of the Global North.

While these governments still rhetorically espouse such principles, the reality has changed dramatically. The current neoliberal system of migrant labour—firmly entrenched in liberal democracies and vital to capitalism's on-going expansion—is a *de facto* regime of forced labour. It is simultaneously a direct product of the dispossession of millions in the Global South from the lands on which they have lived, and of demands for mass supplies of cheap labour in the Global North. Capital wants not just workers, but precarious, low-wage labour. Migration and border regimes effectively secure this, as people who cross borders

or migrate internally to deregulated zones are routinely deprived of the rights to vote, to change employers, to join a union, or to access health-care and education systems. The constant threat of deportation is then leveraged to ensure compliance under these conditions. In addition to facilitating the harsh exploitation of migrant workers, this system also disciplines the citizen workforce. It dampens their demands and expectations by reminding them that they can always be replaced by vulnerable migrants.

At the heart of this system is a transnational rescaling of migrant workers' lives in ways that keep their costs of daily and generational reproduction extraordinarily low. Crucial to this rescaling is a radical separation of the site of capital accumulation (the workplace) from the site of labour renewal (primarily households in their countries of origin). Receiving countries in the Global North do not have to pay a cent for the migrant workers' healthcare, training and education prior to their arrival, and they pay a bare minimum after. Meanwhile the remittances that migrant workers send back—conservatively valued at [\\$530 billion worldwide in 2012](#) and upon which half a billion people on the planet depend—are vital to sustaining the survival of their family members. They are also vital to the economies of some sending countries: the export of labour power to the Global North is now an explicit 'development' policy in places like the Philippines and Mexico, which in turn suffer the loss of millions of trained and educated people. So, employers in the Global North, aided by policies designed to export people, not only get access to a workforce whose reproduction is effectively cost-free for them. The wages sent home once these low-cost workers have migrated also enable the cheap reproduction of the next generation of potential migrant labourers.

This spatially rescaled system of social reproduction develops within a racialised and gendered order that devalues and dehumanises migrant workers. The hierarchical organisation of global capitalism exploits the differences inherent in migrant workers' social and geographic origins,

a process that is intensified by regulations blocking paths to citizenship in the receiving countries. The social abjection that results is expressed in a variety of ways, including regular [moral panics](#) about migrant workers ‘taking’ citizen population jobs. Furthermore, women migrants—whether they work in middle and upper class households as domestics, in maquiladoras, or in the sex trade—are routinely sexualised and subjected to gender-based forms of oppression (e.g. routine pregnancy tests, mundane work ‘suitable’ for women, and intimidation from male supervisors). While the threat of deportation robs them of basic biological reproductive rights and healthcare, the deregulated conditions of their workplaces—along with the disruption of conventional gender norms (as in the case of women working in the maquiladoras)—leave them especially vulnerable to sexual assault or abuse.

It bears emphasising that this social degradation is tied to the very conditions of the neoliberal regime of migrancy. Built upon dispossession and a denial of basic rights, this regime ensures that migrant workers live relatively desperate, anxious and insecure lives. As such, they are capitalism’s ideal subjects: precarious bearers of labour power available for the harsh exploitation meted out to racialised and feminised workers.

This is nothing new. Capitalism has always relied on social processes of abjection, and frequently they have been secured and perpetuated in and through systems of forced labour and migrancy. However much we tend to think of these periods of coerced labour as critical to capitalism’s historical establishment, the current era makes it clear that unfree labour is not a relic of the past. Indeed, capital is not only increasingly reliant on migration, but specifically on the transnational flow of people who are deprived of full citizenship, people who to varying degrees comprise an unfree global workforce. Yet, like enslaved Africans and ‘coolie’ workers before them, they continue to find ways to resist and reclaim their dignity in the face of intense oppression.



Section two

Sector-specific dynamics

It's time to get serious about forced labour in supply chains

We now know that our shopping carts are full of forced labour. So why are governments and industry doing so little to stop it?

Genevieve LeBaron

In June 2014, *the Guardian* ran a [headline news story](#) revealing the widespread use of conditions it described as modern slavery, human trafficking, and forced labour by employers in the Thai prawn industry. It traced the prawns into the freezers of some of the world's largest supermarkets, including Walmart, Tesco and Costco. Surprisingly little has changed since.

Policymakers in the retailers' home countries have largely refused to intervene, claiming—as the UK's Cameron government did—that it is “[up to consumers whether they eat prawns processed in Thailand using slave labour](#)”. The US—which imports [roughly 40 percent](#) of Thailand's shrimp exports—downgraded Thailand in its 2014 *Trafficking in Persons* report and, like [policymakers in the UK](#), has promised to ‘raise concerns’ with the Thai government over slavery and human trafficking. But neither country has asked their supermarkets to stop selling goods knowingly produced with slave labour. In fact, UK policymakers are so reluctant to tell businesses what to do that they have [asked](#) a trade association, the British Retail Consortium, to recommend steps that companies could take to eliminate their own human rights abuses.

Industry hasn't done much better. Retailers claim they are working with their suppliers to deepen existing ‘social auditing’ programmes, which—it is worth pointing out—failed to detect or address this problem in the first place. Representatives of US and UK supermarkets reportedly met in Thailand towards the end of July to create an ‘[industry action group](#)’ that will design yet another corporate social responsibil-



Migrant workers working on a Thai boat, Samut Sakhon, Thailand.
[ILO/Flickr. Creative Commons.](#)

ity (CSR) benchmark for the seafood industry. Simply put, industry efforts to date have been largely focused around the same voluntary CSR and certification efforts that failed to detect or address the rampant labour abuses in the first place.

Meanwhile, prawn-eaters—like [cannabis smokers](#), [hot chocolate drinkers](#), and [gold](#) and [cotton wearers](#) around the world—continue to consume the fruits of forced labour.

Thanks to careful research by academics, reporters and NGOs—and the testimonies and resistance of exploited workers themselves—we now know that our grocery carts are filled with the produce of forced labour. In the UK, severe exploitation is routinely uncovered in the [food industry](#), such as among [chicken and egg collectors](#), [onion pickers](#), [mushroom gatherers](#), and [fishermen](#). While exact numbers remain difficult to pinpoint, week after week household staples are tarnished with new evidence of workers' bondage and exploitation.

The evidence of illegality and human suffering has piled up high enough. It's time to confront the reality that these are not just 'one-off' discoveries attributable to unscrupulous employers or temporary glitches in an otherwise effective social auditing system. The reality now is that severe labour exploitation is endemic in [certain industries](#). It has become a solid and predictable feature of the low-cost, high-volume retail business model that currently reigns in the global economy.

So why are governments and industry doing so little to stop it? Walmart made over [\\$17 billion](#) in profits last year. Tesco made [around £3.7 billion](#). It is surely not unreasonable to ask that these businesses find a way to procure prawns farmed without [recourse to the beating and killing of workers](#), is it?

Yet, the global wave of 'anti-slavery' legislation passed by governments over the past five years has done little to tackle the [business models of forced labour](#). Indeed, while this body of legislation has raised criminal justice consequences for individual perpetrators of forced labour, governments have refused to impose new responsibilities on retailers. Take the UK's 2015 Modern Slavery Act. While the act requires certain companies to report the voluntary efforts they are taking to prevent or address slavery in supply chains, it leaves open the possibility for companies to report that they are doing nothing, or to report that forced labour issues are too far down their supply chain for them to reach.

On the industry side, retailers continue to tinker around the edges of the problem with auditing and certification schemes. But there is little evidence to suggest that they are tackling the underlying dynamics of their supply chains that fuel demand for severe exploitation and sub-minimum wage labour, such as downward pressure on prices and margins, unpredictability of demand, and tightening speed to market. Like many of the problems associated with subcontracting—itself a technique to reduce cost and liability—these dynamics somehow always seem to remain off the table for change.

Eradicating forced labour will require profound changes to contemporary business models. These are not changes that consumers can achieve on their own. Too many products depend on severe forms of exploitation to simply ask consumers to keep slavery out of their shopping carts. This is impossible for even the most conscientious of consumers to achieve, as the credibility of our 'ethical' auditing system has been in tatters ever since a string of 'certified' factories collapsed, burned down, or had exploitation discovered in them weeks later!

In short, it's time for policymakers and industry to get serious about tackling slavery in supply chains.

[An original version of this article was published on the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute \(SPERI\) blog.](#)

Food retailers, market concentration and labour

Market concentration is driving forced labour in the food industry, as retailers' unprecedented power allows them to command low prices, quick turnaround and high quality from farmers and suppliers.

Sébastien Rioux

Selling food is big business, with retail profits rising quickly among a handful of increasingly powerful players. Market concentration in the food retail sector has been paralleled by the proliferation of cases of forced labour in the industry. The two trends are not unrelated. On the contrary, monopolisation in the industry is driving exploitative labour conditions within food supply chains.

Slavery in the [Thai fishing industry](#), forced labour in [American](#) and [British](#) agriculture, child labour and human trafficking in the [chocolate industry](#), and forced labour in [palm oil plantations in Malaysia](#) are just a few examples of the ever-growing number of food commodities produced—in part or in whole—for supermarkets through forced labour.

In 2011 in the European Union, the largest five retailers had a [combined market share of more than 60 percent](#) in thirteen member states (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom), with market concentration exceeding 80 percent in both Denmark and Estonia.

In most countries, however, market concentration among two or three major retailers is the norm. Two supermarket chains—Coles and Woolworths—control [over 70 percent](#) of the Australia's food retailing sector, while Wal-Mart and Kroger made [43.2 percent](#) of grocery store sales in the United States in 2013. In Canada, [55.5 percent](#) of the gro-

cery and food retail sector was held by three retailers in 2011. Similar consolidation can be observed in South Korea, Brazil, and elsewhere.

The net result is an hour-glass-shaped global food system. Masses of farmers and small producers compete to supply a smaller number of processors, manufacturers, and wholesalers. These supply the handful of large retailers at the choke point, who sell directly to the global population of consumers.

Food retailers' unprecedented power as buyers within national and global markets gives them the ability to set the terms under which the food supply chain operates.

Their ability to impose contracts and prices with tough deadlines is key to understanding the growing demand for sub-minimum wages in the food industry.

In order to meet their obligations, stay afloat financially, and weather the efforts of retailers and processors to lower costs, producers and suppliers often subcontract labour and other low value-adding business activities. For example, farmers, who rarely have the labour capacity to harvest time-sensitive crops, may hire large numbers of workers through agencies for short periods of time.

US expenditure on food and non-alcoholic beverages (2012): [US\\$672.6 billion](#)

Total food retail revenue in 2013:

Germany: **US\$204.1 billion**
([€180.4 billion](#))

United Kingdom: **US\$146.1 billion** ([£95.9 billion](#))

France: **US\$172.7 billion** ([€152.7 billion](#))

Top five global retailers by retail revenue in 2012:

Wal-Mart: **US\$469.1 billion**

Tesco: **US\$101.3 billion**

Costco: **US\$99.1 billion**

Carrefour: **US\$98.8 billion**

Kroger: **US\$96.8 billion**

These agencies may in turn outsource their activities to a third party, either because they are unable to meet their obligations or because they want to take advantage of a lower cost provider. As [Jean Alain et al.](#) have noted, labour supply chains operating through multiple intermediaries and stages of subcontracting are particularly vulnerable to forced labour.

Retailers' hold over global food production and their ability to command low prices not only breeds cheap, flexible and casual labour in food production; it also creates the conditions of insecurity under which forced labour flourishes. Forced workers are not victims of greedy and morally bankrupt individuals. They are the living reality of a violent economic environment where food retailers' rising profits and market power go hand in hand with food producers' chronic insecurity and poverty.

Given their market power and central role in shaping the conditions underpinning global food production, food retailers bear special responsibility for the reality of forced labour in the food industry. Tinkering around with 'ethical' audits, labour codes and corporate social responsibility has done little to address the relationship between retail business models and forced labour.

If we have any hope of improving the situation in the short term, then retailers must offer more advantageous conditions to their suppliers, give them longer contracts and pay fair prices for their goods. Buying from the local, regional and national markets where they operate may also be a good start, though these can also depend on forced and prison labour as well, as [Fortune](#) recently revealed.

But make no mistake. Ultimately there can be no sustainable solution to forced labour in the food industry without challenging food retailers' growing power and control over the conditions of production of the essential elements of life.

Free to stitch, or starve: capitalism and unfreedom in the global garment industry

Growing attention is focused on 'modern slavery' and forced labour in the garment industry, but broader forms of unfreedom ensnare the workers stitching our clothes.

Alessandra Mezzadri

The textile and garment industries have always been at the centre of the dark history of capitalism. The early origins of our clothes interweave with those of Britain's 'satanic mills', colonial trade, and black slavery, as illustrated by Sven Beckert in *Empire of Cotton*. The garment industry has hardly managed to get rid of this dark baggage, and its 'modernisation' has manufactured new forms of oppression.

Recent media coverage has focused on the collapse of Rana Plaza in Savar, Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,100 garment workers in April 2013. Horrendous spectacles such as these attract global attention, however far more numerous are the smaller-scale instances of repression endured by garment workers worldwide. Last year, workers fighting for an increase in minimum wages were shot in the streets of Phnom Pehn, Cambodia. In India, several garment units working for UK retailers were accused of employing migrant child labour and refugees. Others deployed the infamous Sumangali scheme, a recruitment practice bonding workers to employers in exchange for a final payment (made of withheld wages) that rarely materialises.

The unveiling of cases of 'bonded' and forced labour in the industry has contributed to a revival of the debate on 'new' or 'modern' slavery. As pointed out by Naila Kabeer, there are many problems with describing garment work as slavery. For instance, it risks emptying the term 'slavery' of those traits not simply linked to labouring, but to a far more complex system of white domination and commodification

of the body. Moreover, this focus on ‘outside-the-system’ extremes has obscured the broader, more endemic forms of labour exploitation that are central to the industry.

The global garment industry reproduces multiple forms of ‘unfreedom’ far surpassing narrower definitions of forced or bonded labour. That said, the ‘freedoms’ available to many garment workers today are often equally undesirable. The underlying cause of this false dichotomy is the rise of neoliberal globalisation.

Jairus Banaji observes that when it comes to labour under capitalism, ‘freedom’ is not the happy term found in the liberal dictionary. As argued by Karl Marx, it simply means that workers are ‘free’ from their means of production and subsistence outside the market. In short, they are dispossessed and can ‘choose’ to either labour or starve. It was this freedom that was available to landless mill workers in seventeenth century Britain and to migrant garment workers in nineteenth century United States. However, in today’s global garment sweatshops the ‘freedom’ of workers to starve can be guaranteed even without full dispossession.

In garment exporting countries, the rise and expansion of an industrial proletariat coincided with the rise of neoliberalism. The neoliberal recipe of structural adjustment accelerated processes of dispossession, making it hard for anyone to survive outside the imperatives of the market. With the rise of neoliberalism, the World Bank also imposed export-oriented industrialisation strategies as ‘the way’ to develop, triggering sustained processes of outsourcing. This policy ‘combo’ ensured the availability of a cheap labour force that, even when not fully divorced from the land, became a reserve army of labour for the new global garment factories. In fact, field studies on garment workers worldwide indicate that sweatshop workers may still have ties to the land or with their rural origins. Their families often engage in multilocal, diversified livelihoods, combining sources of income from

factories, informal work and seasonal agriculture. Studies also show the heterogeneity of garment workers. This depends upon the different tasks workers perform, but also on 'degrees' of dispossession and 'unfreedom'.

Assembly line workers in export processing zones or large industrial estates like Rana Plaza co-exist with armies of home-based workers, who may still own their looms or old stitching machines. Albeit 'un-free' of their possessions, they are all 'free' to stitch or starve. Notably, this lack of full dispossession—this 'unfreedom'—may be here to stay. Such partial unfreedom is useful for both western brands *and* local suppliers, as full dispossession would likely require employers and states to internalise the costs of social reproduction of the labour force. When workers fully depend on selling their labour, only wage or welfare provisions allow them to survive. However, a higher wage would decrease competitiveness and undermine the cheap fashion model. And welfare provisions are low in many garment-exporting countries. In fact, as the recent financial crisis showed, worldwide the neoliberal state is not really big on reproduction.

Garment workers' freedom to stitch or starve intersects what Jan Breman calls 'freedom from a dignified existence'. This does not only mean lack of 'decent' working conditions. Many industrial colonies—be they informal hamlets or panopticon-like industrial dormitories—only (poorly) cater to individual survival needs while forcing workers to separate from their families. One could define this as 'freedom' from social reproduction (or, more simply, from living) outside labour. A greatly alienating experience, the result is that workers are effectively 'unfree' to reproduce as anything but individual workers.

The lack of workers' full dispossession may hardly be transitory, if neither wages nor social welfare provisions increase significantly. However, the sweatshop experience may well be. The working and living rhythms of the sweatshop can hardly be sustained for long and

workers often make garments for a limited time before being replaced by new, younger workers. A [report](#) on Bangladesh by War on Want indicates that 86 percent of workers are between 18 and 32 years of age. Also in [India](#), the majority of garment workers stop working at around 30. This challenges narratives over-celebrating industrial work as a liberating experience that—while harsh—will pay off in the future. [Fast fashion](#) produces a proletariat that may enter and exit the assembly line as quickly as its tops and skirts.

Finally, the ‘freedoms’ and ‘unfreedoms’ available to garment workers also depend on their different social profiles. As argued by [Silvia Federici](#), the human body was ‘the first machine developed by capitalism.’ Men, women and children experience the oppressive rhythms and conditions of the sweatshop in different ways. For instance, inside sweatshops, women workers are controlled via patriarchal norms. Claiming to ‘protect’ them, male managers often lock them into industrial premises. All industrial disasters in the history of the garment industry, from the [Shirtwaist case in New York](#) to the [Tazreen](#) and [Rana Plaza](#) cases in Bangladesh, were made even more lethal by these practices. Neoliberal globalisation did not manufacture these forms of social oppression, but by placing a premium on labour flexibility and comparative advantage it reproduces them when useful to gain competitiveness.

The term ‘modern slavery’ conceals analytical and political tensions when applied to garment work. Media sensationalism aside, its use should be based on the debate regarding the potential evolution of slavery across modes of production, phases of capitalist development, and regimes of wage work. That said, we must acknowledge that the only substantial freedom of garment workers today—that of stitching our clothes—is structured around multiple forms of unfreedom. These far exceed isolated cases of forced labour and stretch across multiple productive and reproductive realms. Thus, perhaps to ensure ‘better clothes’ we should begin by developing better categories of analysis.

Still slaving over sugar

Despite the many nineteenth century acts declaring the emancipation of the enslaved, there are still practices in sugar production that need to be abolished. Is mechanisation the answer?

Ben Richardson

The legal trade in human chattel may have ended but the egregious exploitation of sugar labourers has not. The industry continues to draw on management techniques developed in slave times—including the use of disempowered migrant, bonded and child labour—to keep costs down and profits up. It's working: [the global sugar market is worth US\\$68 billion](#) and is making some [plantation owners](#) very rich indeed.

One way in which surplus value continues to be squeezed out of the labour force has been through *intensifying the working day*. This has been the case in Brazil, the world's leading producer of sugarcane. As my recent field research confirmed, rather than being paid a day rate or salary, field workers are paid a piece-rate according to how much cane they cut. Alongside this economic inducement, cultural norms are deployed that associate large harvests with masculine notions of strength and fortitude. These incentives to (over)work are supported by techniques to prevent under-work. The initial hiring process involves a long trial period in which those who cut less cane are not retained. For those who are kept on, transport to and from the fields at set times and the threat of unpaid suspension or not being rehired next season keeps workers from easing off. This calculated increase in worker productivity has resulted in a regime of [bio-psychological exhaustion](#). According to a lawyer with the São Paulo district attorney's office, at least [eighteen cane cutters died](#) in the state from dehydration, heart attacks or other ailments between 2004 and 2008.

In essence, the working lives of cane cutters are condensed down into

a few years of extreme toil, at which point they have to be replaced by new workers willing to take on the challenge. This helps explain the prevalence of migrant workers in the sugar industry, as these are the people who most desperately seek waged employment and are most readily disciplined into the workforce.

Ensuring a ready supply of migrant labourers is key to the second strategy by which exploitation has taken place: *lowering the wage*. One way this has been achieved is through the use of **bonded labour**, where debt is used as a mechanism both to recruit workers and severely restrict their freedom, wages and bargaining power. In Tamil Nadu, India—another of the world's major sugarcane producers—many estates rely on lower-paid migrant labour organised by the sugar mills. The mills use intermediary labour contractors offering advance, lump-sum payments to recruit people from low-caste communities, who are then transported to the cane fields often hundreds of kilometres from where they live. In the face of widespread poverty and unemployment, these jobs are attractive to workers as they provide a lump sum loan that can be used to cover immediate expenditures—say a marriage ceremony or medical fees—and offer a modicum of job security. However, the pittance these workers are paid leaves them with very little at the end of the season, making it **difficult for them to pay off their debts**. Many are thus trapped into returning to the highly crowded and unhygienic makeshift camps of cane cutters year after year.

Another way in which wages have been lowered is through **child labour**. In desk research I gathered credible sources which reported this in the sugar industries of **twenty-three countries**, many of which export to the USA and the UK. Across the world, tens of thousands of children are incorporated into sugar's division of labour, assigned different work according to their age and sex. While older boys tend to do manual harvesting and chemical spraying, younger children are tasked with things like planting, weeding and stacking the crops for mechanical loading. For this they are paid much less than adults, often

because they are deemed as ‘family helpers’ for which they do not need to be rewarded individually.

As well as working on the site of *production*, children also work without recognition on the site of *reproduction*. This refers to [domestic labour in the camps](#) set up to accommodate migrant workers, where girls do chores such as cooking, washing clothes, and fetching water and wood. This mirrors much of the [work done by children on family farms](#), which may not be directly related to sugarcane production but is nonetheless invaluable to the farm’s economic viability. Both of these unpaid forms of labour help to suppress wages by reducing the amount income-earners have to spend on subsistence.



John McQuaid/Flickr. Creative Commons.

In my experience talking to industry actors and development organisations about these exploitative labour practices, it is common for them to be dismissed as artefacts of a bygone age. These jobs are intrinsically abusive and un-remunerative, the argument goes, and so have no place in a modern economy. As such, a far better way of protecting workers in the sugar industry is to do away with manual labour and family farming altogether. This dovetails with the desire of some company managers to increase labour productivity not by intensifying the working day but by *industrialising agriculture*. Mechanised farming on standardised fields is [the most sustainable route to long-term profitability](#).

But notes of caution must be sounded. Just because machines *can* make

work easier, it doesn't mean they *do*. For example, reports have surfaced of drivers working [24-hour shifts](#) in Brazilian cane fields at harvest time, leading to serious accidents due to exhaustion at the wheel. Moreover, it seems somewhat perverse as a developmental strategy to eradicate abusive labour through mass unemployment, especially when alternative forms of stable waged labour are not readily available. Between 2009 and 2014, for example, the British-owned company [Ill-ovo Sugar slashed its African workforce](#) by over 10,000 people at the same time as it actually expanded output. This is the general direction in which the global industry is moving: evermore sugar produced by ever fewer people. Given the adverse health effects of sugar for consumers too, it poses important questions about who benefits from this model of rural development.

But other options are available. Workers can protect themselves if trade unions are empowered to negotiate better conditions. Child labour can be de-incentivised if universal free schooling is provided. The pressure on family farming can be eased through more equitable supply-chain pricing models, while appropriate technology can be developed that seeks a socially acceptable form of increased productivity. And of course, there's always the option of using sugar land for other purposes entirely. Cooperatively grown sweet potato, anyone?

Ben Richardson's new book, [Sugar](#), was released in September 2015.



Section three

Existing policy responses

Harsh labour: bedrock of global capitalism

Global supply chains are not benign spheres of opportunity, but tools for increasing the exploitation of labour in both the Global North and the Global South.

Benjamin Selwyn

In June 2014, *The Guardian* ran a [story](#) about how slave labour is used in Thailand to catch the prawns sold on UK and US high streets. The previous year it [reported](#) how child labour is employed in Apple's factories across China. In April 2013, the collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza in greater Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed 1,129 people, many of whom were women garment workers. These cases of forced, child and extremely dangerous labour are part and parcel of contemporary global capitalism.

Global supply chains are frequently portrayed as generating win-win situations, not only creating new profit opportunities for multinational firms and delivering cheap goods to Northern workers, but also creating employment and reducing poverty in the Global South. For example, Jeffrey Sachs, former director of the United Nations Millennium Project, argued in [*The End of Poverty: How We Can Make it Happen in our Lifetime*](#), that the proliferation of sweatshops across the Global South should be welcomed because “sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty”.

The proliferation of global supply chains has taken place within the context of the rapid expansion of the global labouring class—from around one billion individuals in 1980 to over three billion today. At the same time, global wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. Indeed, Oxfam [estimated](#) in 2014 that the world's 85 richest *people* were as wealthy as the poorest *half* of the world.

Is there a relationship between highly concentrated wealth and mass, global poverty? Where does the proliferation of global supply chains fit into this picture? And what about highly exploited and forced labour?

Over the past four decades, transnational corporations have used global supply chains to obtain cheaper inputs from, and outsource labour to, lower cost regions of the world economy. This not only cuts overheads and boosts profits, but also pressures workforces in advanced capitalist countries to accept cuts in wages or face their work also being outsourced. Put differently, global supply chains have been used to raise the rate of exploitation of labour.

Transnational firms have raised the rate of labour exploitation throughout their supply chains, North and South. Downward pressure on wages and conditions in one part of the chain generates similar pressures elsewhere in the chain, *ad infinitum*. In the Global North, where trade unions, labour standards and state regulation of labour markets are still relatively robust, increasing the rate of labour exploitation occurs mainly through technological innovation, wage reduction, and the worsening of conditions.

Robert Reich's film *Inequality for All* shows the collapse of wages for the typical male worker: from \$48,000 a year in the late 1970s down to \$33,000 a year by 2010 (inflation adjusted). In terms of maintaining consumption, there are two ways in which this wage decline can be bridged. One is through debt (which led to the sub-prime mortgage crisis). The other is through forcing down the price of goods imported from abroad. The latter has been achieved—and generated huge profits for US firms in the process—through reliance upon harsh labour regimes in the Global South.

Labour market regulation is weak in much of the Global South. Trade unions are, or until recently were, banned in many countries, or under tight state control (as in China). This has allowed the increased ex-



Migrant fisherman, Thailand. John Hulme for the ILO/Flickr. Creative Commons.

exploitation of labour to take different forms from those in the Global North. Here there are opportunities aplenty for child and forced labour, harsh treatment, long hours, poverty pay, and minimal or no safety standards. For example, in 2014, a Cambodian working a minimum wage job in the country's booming textile industry earned \$100 a month (USD in market exchange rate). The Clean Clothes campaign calculates that [a living wage in Cambodia](#)—enough to meet the basic needs of a family of four—is \$283 a month, almost three times the minimum wage.

Harsh labour regimes in the Global South ensure that workers obtain a tiny fraction of the value they create. In the above case in Cambodia, workers [receive around 24 cents](#) on an \$8 T-shirt.

Contemporary global capitalism is predicated upon an enormous and impoverished global labouring class toiling to generate wealth for a tiny, super-rich elite. The mainstream media and development industry portrays globalisation in benign terms, framing it as an opportunity for the world's poor to access the benefits of the world market. In re-

ality, large sections of the world's labouring class are severely exploited by global corporations. This is the bedrock of global capitalism.

There are numerous grassroots campaigns, by labouring class and non-governmental organisations, as well as by more responsible governments, to combat one aspect or another of harsh labour. However, many of these campaigns understand harsh labour as a consequence of corporate malpractice, rather than as a structural feature of the global economy.

Moreover, these campaigns are hampered by a developmental discourse that portrays the world market as a benign sphere of opportunity, and sweatshops as pathways out of poverty. Such discourses and practices serve to reproduce harsh labour and to delegitimise campaigns against it.

Hopefully one of the outcomes of this edited collection will be to persuade a few people to question the portrayal of the global market place as a benign sphere of opportunity. Challenging such assumptions can also feed into the attempts by harshly exploited workers to ameliorate their conditions.

Addressing forced labour in fragmented chains of production: protect...respect...and remedies for the global economy?

What are the prospects for protecting workers in global supply chains? From UN principles to business and worker efforts, the range of initiatives is impressive—but many remain seriously flawed.

Fabiola Mieres and Siobhán McGrath

We love buying exotic and low-priced food, cheap T-shirts, and eye-catching novelties. We love all these things that make us feel ‘special’. And as informed readers we might also have a sense of the long journey Uzbek or Brazilian cotton makes through China or India to become that precious T-shirt later resold in other parts of the world. This dispersion and fragmentation of global production is celebrated as one of the key features of the global economy. Indeed, Cattaneo *et al.* describe it as constituting its [backbone and central nervous system](#).

What are the consequences of this for forced labour in supply chains? In this piece we examine several different initiatives aimed at addressing forced labour within globally fragmented production. Our goal is to highlight examples of what may or may not work as we begin to tackle this problem. We briefly discuss the global template provided by the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#). We explore one corporate initiative in electronics, and we end with a grass-roots action as an example of worker-driven responsibility.

UN guiding principles on business and human rights

While global corporations have been reaping the benefits of the fragmentation they have pursued, at the global level there has been some acknowledgment that there are human rights issues emerging from such fragmentation. Fragmentation in global production refers to the geographical slicing up of supply chains in search of low-cost suppliers

offshore, which raises questions about where to locate the responsibility for human right abuses. This prompted the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to appoint John Ruggie, a professor at Harvard University, as the [UN secretary-general's special representative on business & human rights](#) in 2005. Six years after Ruggie began his investigation, the Human Rights Council endorsed the '[UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)', informally known as the 'Ruggie Principles'.

These principles attempt to link multinational corporations to the human rights abuses in which they are implicated. In doing so, they resort to nation-states' duty to 'protect' their citizens from human right abuses by third parties, including business enterprises. They call on companies to 'respect' those human rights, as well as recognise the need for greater access by victims to judicial and non-judicial remedies. As they stand, however, the guiding principles fall short of adequately addressing forced labour in fragmented supply chains. As 'guidelines', they constitute *voluntary regulation* that may require nothing more than updating fancy social responsibility websites (yes, more CSR).

Some nation-states have been pushing for these guidelines to become more substantive, taking the shape of a legally binding instrument on transnational corporations with respect to human rights. Led by [Ecuador and South Africa](#), a [resolution](#) was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2014 to:

establish an open-ended intergovernmental working group on a legally binding instrument on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights, ... to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises.

This was signed by Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela. There were twenty further votes in favour, and unfortunately, a similar number against. The path towards a binding instrument therefore seems riddled with difficulties. Not only do conflicts between nation-states stand in the way of progress, but so do those powerful governments that host the largest transnational corporations.

In the meantime, consumers await the latest technological gadgets, *à la mode* trends and the availability of cheap foodstuffs in supermarkets. Production processes do not pause for nation-states' negotiations. Retailers, not to mention armies of suppliers and subcontractors, keep business running as usual. Can workers who face abusive conditions afford to wait for countries to agree on the passing of an instrument? Even so, what space would forced labour have within the broader spectrum of human rights abuses?

There are no clear-cut answers to questions such as this, but a number of other organic initiatives around forced labour in supply chains are beginning to emerge. These responses have different, and at times competing, rationales but a preliminary look depicts a complex landscape.

Subcontracting in electronics

So is there any hope? There are some rare but promising cases. Recently Apple announced that it will assume the [responsibility of paying the fees](#) that workers hand over to recruiters to begin employment. Fees paid to recruiters are a key element in bonded labour. Apple repaid more than [USD 3.96 million](#) to foreign contract workers for excessive recruitment fees charged by labour brokers. [In 2014, nearly one in every three foreign workers \(32% of the study sample\) in the electronics industry in Malaysia was found in situations of forced labour.](#) Findings showed that forced labour is linked to the charging of recruitment fees and the indebtedness that follows. Fully 92% of all foreign workers surveyed in the study paid recruitment fees to get

their jobs. This prompted Hewlett Packard to launch the [HP Foreign Migrant Worker Standard](#).

Developed in collaboration with [Verité](#), the organisation that authored the report, the HP standard bans suppliers from outsourcing the migrant-worker employment relationship to third party labour intermediaries. [The use of labour contractors is a key source of vulnerability](#) for workers: migrant workers in particular are charged recruitment fees and their passports are routinely retained. Verité's study states that 94% of foreign workers in the sample reported that their passports were held by the facility or their broker/agent.

Theoretically, the HP Standard eliminates the practices of charging fees and withholding documents within its supply chain. We have yet to see how well this will be implemented or enforced. So far the HP Standard is framed within the supply chain responsibility programme that includes annual factory audits and risk-based assessments. Nevertheless, the HP Standard serves as a proof of concept that the end buyer can assume responsibility for upstream abuse, in this case the problems associated with labour subcontracting. Also, it shows that not all CSR initiatives are equal: some may show promise when they respond to grassroots pressures to address the fragmentation of production itself, rather than only the consequences.

Fair food programme

A more developed initiative from the fields of Florida also offers signs of hope. Farmworkers in US agriculture have experienced harsh working conditions for decades. These have included situations of 'slavery', in which individuals have been held against their will, threatened with violence, and forced to work for little or no money at all.

The [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) has, since their early campaigns in 1993, pushed for a 'worker-driven social responsibility' paradigm that offers an alternative to 'top down' approaches of corporate social

responsibility. The implementation of the [Fair Food Programme](#) (FFP) has been a milestone in the development of this paradigm.

Much can be learned from the FFP, but we would like to stress two salient aspects. First, workers play a central role as trained social auditors, reinforcing and filing complaints as they appear. Second, farm labour contractors have historically managed and provide the labour pools in different states of the US—with many instances of violation of rights. Growers participating in the programme, however, are required to directly hire and pay the workers engaged in harvesting, irrigation, planting and other non-supervisory roles. The fragmentation that occurs at the workplace through the presence of farm labour contractors disappears by bringing growers back into the picture as active partners in guaranteeing good working conditions.

To sum up, if fragmentation of production is the key feature of the global economy, then we need to pay further attention to the social foundations of this process. While the application of the Ruggie Principles are being discussed in the international arena, other actors are engaging with fragmentation in socially constructive ways. Banning labour subcontracting in supply chains, and worker-led models of social responsibility offer hope of more substantial remedies for the ills of the global economy. We hope to see more ahead.

This piece is part of the ongoing project on 'Globalised Production of Goods' within the interdisciplinary network [DemandAT](#). Follow the project on Twitter [@demandRights](#).

Global supply chains: role of law? A role for law!

International law lacks stringent mechanisms for ensuring worker protection in global supply chains. It is the responsibility of wealthy nations, which are home to major corporations, to fill this legal gap.

Andreas Rühmkorf

Forced labour is a common feature of global supply chains. In June 2014, [reports about the use of slave labour in the Thai fishing industry](#) dramatically reminded the British public about the labour practices of many supply chains. This followed recurrent reports about the use of slave labour by suppliers in the textile industry, particularly [in Bangladesh](#). These kinds of human rights abuses occur in a range of industries where production has been outsourced to suppliers in the developing world.

No binding international human rights law on companies

Anyone reading these reports will usually wonder if there is no international law on those issues. The answer is a bit tricky. Yes, international law addresses slave labour in treaties, conventions and declarations. For example, [Article 4 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) stipulates that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms." However, the difficulty with forced labour in global supply chains is that traditional legal concepts and globalisation do not easily fit together. The transnational nature of global supply chains poses a challenge for law as it cuts across territorial borders.

The main reasons why law has so far struggled to adequately address human rights abuses in global supply chains are clear. First, law is very much a territorial concept and it is therefore primarily states that regulate forced labour. Many countries where the use of force labour in production is prevalent have bound themselves by international treaties to



Trolleys of food ready to be loaded onto lorries for delivery to grocery stores across southern England. Nick Saltmarsh/Flickr. Creative Commons.

eliminate these issues. However, the problem in many jurisdictions of the developing world is that either the written law does not address those issues or the law enforcement mechanisms are weak. Moreover, international law is traditionally law *between* states. This means that it is the duty of those states that are signatories to international treaties against slavery to implement their commitments. *Companies are not directly bound by international human rights law.*

Corporate law, corporate groups and supply chains

The use of forced labour constitutes both a crime and a tort. A crime is an unlawful act that is punishable by states. A tort, on the other hand, is a civil wrong that unfairly causes someone else to suffer loss or harm, for example an injury due to negligence. The person who commits the tortious act is liable to the tort victim, who can recover damages for the loss or harm. Generally speaking, there is no vicarious liability (imposing responsibility in law on a superior person for the failure of a subordinate person) in criminal law. However, this concept is used in tort cases, for example the responsibility of an employer for the negligent acts of their employees in the course of their employment. It could, in theory, therefore also be used in order to hold multinational enterprises liable.

However, the idea of holding multinational companies liable for the human rights violations occurring in their global supply chains faces challenges in company law. Companies are generally considered as entities separate from their owners. This means that an overseas subsidiary company, which is owned by a multinational company, is a separate entity in law even if it is wholly owned by its multinational parent. In English law, parent companies are not held legally responsible for the illegal acts (torts) of their subsidiaries—only the subsidiaries themselves are liable for their wrongdoing. This approach limits the responsibility of multinational enterprises as they can hide behind their subsidiaries. The increasing use of suppliers further exacerbates this issue, as these companies are not even owned by the Western multinational enterprises.

Private corporate social responsibility regimes

Against the background of this legal vacuum, human rights abuses such as the use of forced labour have become a widespread feature of global supply chains. However, due to reputational concerns about negative publicity, most multinational companies have started to ‘voluntarily’ adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards for

their supply chains. Unfortunately, after more than a decade of such private CSR systems [it is evident that not much has changed in practice](#). This situation raises serious questions about the effectiveness of this private CSR regime.

The main weakness of such private CSR regimes is that they lack publicly enforced sanctions in the case of noncompliance. Although many multinational companies incorporate these CSR commitments into their contracts with their direct (first-tier) suppliers, this does not mean that the use of forced labour stops. As western buyers are responsible for not only the incorporation of these commitments into supply contracts, but also for their subsequent monitoring and enforcement, everything hinges on the vigour with which individual buyers carry out these tasks. Moreover, even if multinationals did their utmost to ensure compliance among their first-tier suppliers, with which they have direct contracts, evidence shows that most [human rights abuses usually occur far below the first-tier suppliers](#). In other words, most human rights abuses are several degrees removed from the western buyers. They take place within the many layers of sub-contractors comprising global supply chains today.

Criminal liability as part of a more effective CSR regime

The inability of the existing system to curb human rights abuses in global supply chains raises the question of whether there is anything that could be done through law in the home state of multinational enterprises. One stringent [proposal](#) is to make it a criminal offence for forced labour to exist anywhere in the supply chains of multinational enterprises. This idea was suggested in the UK during the drafting stage of the Modern Slavery Bill, but rejected by the government. Instead, the government is now introducing new duties on companies to report on what they are doing to prevent forced labour in their supply chains. The danger is that the reporting will remain a box-ticking activity as it lacks the threat of liability of a criminal offence.

Such an offence would apply English criminal law extraterritorially. The UK [Bribery Act 2010](#) shows that such an extraterritorial criminal liability for corporations is possible. Section 7 of that Act criminalises the failure to prevent bribery by a person associated with it irrespective of where the bribery was committed. An associated person could also be a supplier. As this offence applies both to UK companies and overseas companies that carry out business in the UK, the only way that companies could avoid this liability would be by exiting the UK market entirely.

A similar offence for the use of forced labour could be modelled on Section 7 of this Act. It is likely that this would induce multinational enterprises to do more than at present to ensure that their suppliers and sub-suppliers do not use forced labour. The reasons are twofold. Most obviously, eliminating instances of forced labour would reduce the chances of being hauled before the courts. If that happens, however, proof that a company has instituted adequate due diligence mechanisms to prevent forced labour by its business partners constitutes a valid defence. Therefore, corporate criminal law could therefore improve the compliance with private CSR standards.

Admittedly, law alone will not be able to eradicate the use of forced labour in global supply chains. It does, however, have the potential to make an important contribution. The home states of multinational enterprises cannot be silent on those issues. In light of the absence of a binding international human rights framework imposed on companies, and in light of the weak law and/or law enforcement mechanisms in many countries of the developing world, the home states of multinationals must lead the fight against forced labour in supply chains.

Modern slavery and the responsibilities of individual consumers

How can one be an ethical consumer in a globalised world? There are ways to mitigate our involvement in harmful global supply chains. Continuing with business as usual is unacceptable.

Christian Barry and Kate MacDonald

We are regularly confronted with disturbing news about our connection as individuals to various forms of wrongful harm involved in the production and trade of everyday products. Purchasing [iPhones](#), [seafood](#) or [chocolate](#), for example, seems to involve us with practices of modern slavery or trafficking.

Wrongful harm can occur at many points in complex global production chains. Slave or bonded labour may be used to create products. Purchasers may exploit their market power to obtain components or goods at unfair prices. Alternatively, production processes may encourage or enable wrongdoing by others. For example, [millions of people have died in Africa](#) in recent decades because of conflicts directly related to the extraction and sale of minerals.

NoirKitsuné/Flickr. Creative Commons.



Most people claim they want to do ‘the right thing’ when confronted with these facts, yet it is far from clear what that might be. Thus, consequently many people do nothing. How should we approach this? There seem to be three broad options.

Option 1: do nothing

We can simply do nothing, and go on purchasing goods without considering what is involved in their production. This stance is often justified by claiming that, when faced with problems of such magnitude and complexity, individual responses are futile. We might understandably wonder whether there is any point in changing our behaviour, since we would forgo benefits without mitigating the harms.

Problematically, however, the do-nothing approach doesn’t appear to be accepted elsewhere. Few people believe, for example, that prior to the American Civil War, ordinary citizens were obliged to do nothing about slavery, simply because any difference they might have made would have been vanishingly small.

Moreover, just because we cannot easily track the effects of our actions, it does not follow that our actions have no effect. Not only do small individual actions have potentially large cumulative effects—as efforts to end slavery and sexual discrimination have shown— but individual choices have powerful signalling effects regarding what we value as a society, and what behaviour we expect from others. Doing nothing signals to producers and other consumers that it is okay that such processes continue.

Another line of argument states that doing nothing is acceptable because this is a problem for collective institutions and governments, not individuals, to solve. To be sure, this might be the most fair and effective way of addressing the issue if national governments and other institutions were willing and able to stop extreme exploitation. But when government institutions lack the requisite capacity to effectively

tackle such harm, and when state institutions use their powers and resources to promote other ends, it seems hard to argue that individuals should not step up, just as courageous individuals in the antislavery movement did.

Option 2: refuse to buy goods identified as linked to harm

A second option would simply be to refuse to buy such goods. Such conscientious consumerism is appealing because it appears to remove us from direct involvement in the harmful processes. It also signals that harmful practices are unacceptable. This option seems particularly attractive when 'ethical' versions of the goods are available.

But what if the goods in question are things that we seem to need to function well in modern societies, and no 'ethical' alternatives are available? Is it acceptable to continue to purchase and use iPhones, for example, if a comparable but more ethically-produced smartphone is unavailable? Are we obliged to make significant sacrifices when our purchases have so little effect on anyone's welfare?

Option 3: buy the products you want, but undertake countervailing efforts to redress harm

A third option is to continue to purchase such goods, but only if we simultaneously try to address the kinds of problems that are embedded in these products. Just what consumers should do might depend on their capacities. For example, a student might initiate or join collective social movements that question and resist the practices involved in producing apparel sold by their universities, while an investor might help pressure more powerful institutional actors they hold shares in to help address the issues. Others may support social change by supporting political parties, or other social organisations committed to taking action on these issues. Legislation on the trade in so-called conflict diamonds, for example, could not have been achieved without such efforts.

So what should the concerned ethical consumer do?

To be sure, a concerned consumer must wrestle with an array of difficult trade-offs: between helping people who are immediately disadvantaged, or promoting actions that carry the possibility of bringing about broader systemic change; between making a big difference for a small number of people, or a smaller difference for a greater number of people; and so on. But these challenges are part and parcel of any effort to bring about large-scale social change. And it is important to recognise that real change may be occurring even while serious problems persist—incremental improvements in labour standards can mean a lot to the people they affect, even if the improved conditions still seem seriously objectionable.

What then should we do? First, we must accept that doing nothing cannot be justified. Working out what precisely we ought to do is very difficult, but that doesn't excuse us from continuing to try. When alternatives are available, we should be willing to take on additional costs to purchase them instead, since by doing so, we promote and facilitate the production of goods in a different way. We must be cautious in assessing such alternatives, since they may not always be better and it is often difficult for us to tell the difference. When such alternative products are unavailable, we must explore the most promising means of addressing these problems in other ways, and here also we may be quite unsure how best to proceed. But waiting for certainty in this, as in most important social justice goals, is not a luxury we can afford.



Section four

Benchmarking and labour
governance

The politics of numbers: the Global Slavery Index and the marketplace of activism

The Global Slavery Index is profoundly flawed methodologically, yet it remains widely and often uncritically cited. What underlies the production and use of highly suspect statistics?

André Broome and Joel Quirk

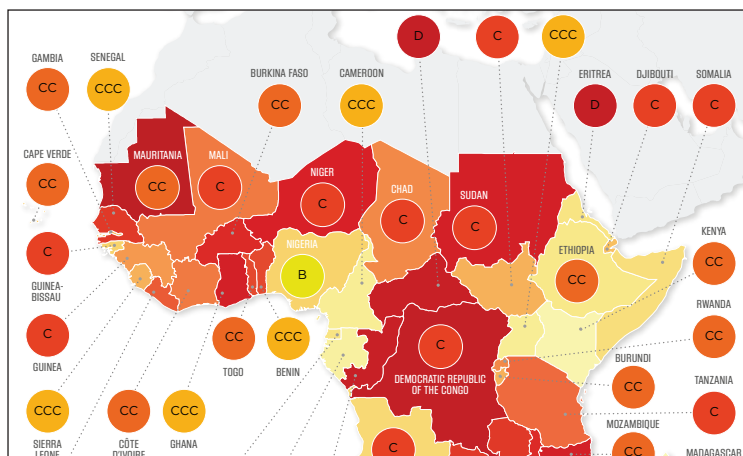
In November 2014, the [Walk Free Foundation](#) launched the second edition of their flagship [Global Slavery Index](#). The [press release](#) for the launch declared the index to be ‘the most accurate and comprehensive measure of the extent and risk of modern slavery’, building upon an ‘improved methodology’ including random-sample surveys from nineteen countries. This emphasis on methods was significant, because the [inaugural 2013 index](#) had been [repeatedly criticised](#) for using [unreliable, incomplete and inappropriate](#) data. Despite this focus on improved methods, the second version of the index once again attracted [sustained criticism](#). One of the sharpest challenges came from [Anne Gallagher](#), who reported that the index contained ‘critical errors of fact and logic’.

While Walk Free wouldn’t necessarily agree with these exact sentiments, they have [nonetheless acknowledged](#) that the index suffers from a number of limitations. These problems are not unique to the slavery index, but also apply to [global estimates](#) of slavery and trafficking [more broadly](#). It is not our intention to revisit these specific methodological issues here. Instead, we are interested in why non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Walk Free have continued to generate statistical information that they know to be highly suspect, and why numerous third parties have continued to reproduce these types of statistical claims despite also knowing the same.

The Global Slavery Index, global benchmarking, and the politics of numbers

To help answer this question, we first need to consider the larger context. The Global Slavery Index is not a new innovation, but can instead be best understood as the extension of an already well-established template to a new topic. Over the last two decades, there has been [remarkable explosion](#) in the prevalence of national, regional and global benchmarks, such as indices and rankings. Some notable examples from a much larger trend include the [Fragile/Failed States Index](#) (Fund for Peace, from 2005), the [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) (Transparency International, 1995), the [Climate Change Performance Index](#), (Germanwatch & Climate Action Network Europe, 2006), and the more venerable [Freedom in the World](#) report (Freedom House, 1972). In this specific piece we are concerned with NGOs, but it is important to note that this trend also involves governments (e.g. [Trafficking in Persons Report](#), 2001), international organisations ([Human Development Index](#), 1990), and corporations ([PRS Group](#), 1979).

The Global Slavery Index closely adheres to established strategies and conventions. Complex social, economic and political phenomena—such as state stability and discrimination—are made both easily accessible and globally commensurable through radical simplification and ‘guesstimation’. Distinctive qualities are converted into numerical quantities, which are then compared and assessed in terms of orders of magnitude. [Challenging and contested concepts—such as slavery—](#)acquire fixed and unproblematic meanings, which are presumed to be universally applicable irrespective of cultural context. Having [crudely converted the social world](#) into numerical values, the Global Slavery Index then goes on to assign countries a ranking, with a ranking of one being the worst and a ranking of 167 being the best. These rankings are further organised into numerous tables, both global and regional, and are also found alongside ‘heat maps’, with shades of green, yellow and red being assigned to countries on a map.



The Africa heat map from Walk Free's *Global Slavery Index 2014*. Fair Use.

In addition to seeking to measure prevalence, the 2014 index assigns governments a grade based upon their performance in combating slavery (i.e. AAA, AA, A, BBB etc.), and uses a composite scale in an attempt to gauge vulnerability (ranging from one to 100). Here, as elsewhere, the Global Slavery Index presents its findings in a similar fashion to other 'benchmarkers', who also routinely make use of rankings, heat maps, grades and scales. In keeping with conventions, Walk Free makes further reference to a 'top ten' list, which is a popular device used to draw attention to the 'best' or 'worst' performers. In a world where school league tables and other metrics have become pervasive, the idea of ranking countries based on performance is a concept with which we are already familiar.

Numbers are fundamental to the political appeal of global benchmarking. Unlike words, which require interpretation, numerical claims are widely held to encapsulate unbiased facts. We have a tendency to fixate on specific numerical claims, which create 'anchoring effects' by establishing high profile 'information shortcuts' that shape how we then approach specific topics. Take, for example, the still popular—yet also

highly speculative—claim that there are [27 million slaves in the world today](#). This was first published in the late 1990s, and then subsequently acquired the status of a timeless ‘fact’ via public repetition. Also important here is the capacity of numbers to present information in a format that is easily accessible to non-expert audiences, who might otherwise be overwhelmed by contextual details. The complex back-story behind how specific numbers are produced routinely gets lost once they are put into the public domain.

The political properties of numbers have contributed to demand for more and more numbers. This demand comes from journalists, politicians, administrators, activists and many others. Whenever there is [significant demand, then supply is likely to follow](#). It is within this larger context that benchmarking has emerged as a popular strategy amongst NGOs. Thanks to the remarkable proliferation of NGOs since the 1970s, activists have been increasingly forced to compete with their peers for audiences, allies and investment. Benchmarking can serve a number of purposes within this competitive marketplace. Most notably, benchmarks can help to make a political case that the cause being benchmarked is worthy of concern, raise the profile of the organisation involved, and also promote their own vision of what ‘[the cause](#)’ looks like. Recognising that ‘first movers’ such as Freedom House have been able to raise their profile and reputation, NGOs such as Walk Free have turned to benchmarking to help build their own brand, and to promote their own conception of how slavery and trafficking should be understood.

As anyone who works on slavery and trafficking can tell you, the number of NGOs focusing on this topic has expanded tremendously within a short space of time. Within this crowded marketplace, the Global Slavery Index advances the Walk Free brand on a number of fronts. First, and most obviously, the index helps to build its public profile. Benchmarks are catnip for journalists, so publishing a benchmark typically attracts a huge amount of media attention both for the cause and

for the organisation producing the benchmark. Moreover, benchmarks also offer a useful platform from which to seek the endorsement and support of the rich and powerful (the Global Slavery Index has [been endorsed by](#) Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Julia Gillard, Bill Gates, Richard Branson and Mo Ibrahim, amongst others).

Second, benchmarks have proved to be effective as a tool for establishing a reputation for authoritative expertise and credibility, which may or may not be warranted. In the case of the Global Slavery Index, Walk Free has sought to bolster its credentials by bringing in Kevin Bales, who is best known for the figure of 27 million slaves mentioned above. Finally, benchmarks have also proved to be popular amongst funders, and NGOs have long been adept at working out what funders want and tailoring at least some of their activities accordingly (this is probably less of a concern for Walk Free, which has private funding). Thanks in part to the digital revolution of the last two decades, benchmarks have also become relatively cheap and easy to produce and disseminate. It is not necessary to have years of expertise in the field, or knowledge of local languages. What is instead primarily required is the capacity to compile different forms of secondary data, which often in turn involves aggregating information from one benchmark in order to create another.

The cost of radical simplification

Walk Free is aware that the Global Slavery Index rests upon a very limited foundation, but it has calculated that the advantages of having a slavery benchmark outweigh any likely costs and complications. Most third parties who use the index have made the same call. As we have demonstrated, the main advantages associated with having a slavery index are political and organisational, rather than analytical. While benchmarks tend to be good at generating brand recognition and publicity, this success relies upon the popular appeal of ‘information shortcuts’ that sidestep all kinds of substantive issues.

It is not possible to have a Global Slavery Index without reducing different forms of complex and case-specific phenomenon into more easily comparable and accessible numerical values and statistical tables. Huge amounts of depth and detail invariably gets ‘lost in translation’ as a consequence of this process of radical simplification (while unreliable and incomplete data can in turn acquire the status of ‘facts’, which they really do not deserve). It is this type of detail that is essential to formulating and applying effective policy solutions. In addition, benchmarking also tends to have the effect of assigning responsibility for ‘success’ and ‘failure’ *within* countries, and thereby end up failing to engage with forms of interdependence *between* different parts of the globe. As Siobhán Mcgrath and Fabiola Mieres [argue elsewhere](#), the ranking system used by the Global Slavery index ultimately ‘implies that the blame should be placed squarely on the national governments of the less ‘developed’ countries for the plight of their citizens’, and in turn casts more ‘developed’ and ‘civilised’ countries in the role of ‘rescuers’.

While Walk Free and other NGOs are aware of at least some of these problems, they are reluctant to say too much about their overall ramifications. This could end up casting doubt upon their statistical findings (perhaps slavery isn’t as big as reported), their vision of ‘the cause’ (perhaps slavery isn’t the best frame of reference) and/or their organisation (perhaps Walk Free doesn’t have the expertise it claims). This contributes to an environment where there is widespread reluctance to seriously question statistical ‘facts’ that rest upon shaky foundations, and which in turn offer an ineffective—or counterproductive—foundation for thinking about more effective policy interventions.

The Global Slavery Index is a great publicity tool, but it is not very good at offering the type of nuanced analysis required to guide either understanding or policy. A trade-off between the political and analytical has taken place here, and this needs to be publicly recognised. Radical simplification often comes at the cost of contextual understanding.

ILO campaigns: missing the wood for the trees?

The ILO's struggle against forced labour doesn't go far enough. By abstracting 'forced labour' from capitalism, it de-politicises all labour exploitation. This is the opposite of what is needed.

Jens Lerche

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN body charged with the eradication of forced labour worldwide, should be credited for its role in returning forced labour to the international limelight. Although its binding international conventions against forced labour go back to 1930, it was the ILO's 1998 'Decent Work' campaign that made it a force to be reckoned with. This campaign put forced labour on the centre stage, and made its abolition one of the four core, required policies for all countries wishing remain a part of the ILO.

The [Decent Work campaign](#) set up a 'Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour' within the ILO, which has published internationally recognised reports on forced labour for more than a decade. It has put a number on the phenomenon—presently it states that there are nearly 21 million in forced labour worldwide—while working with governments to design and implement approaches, initiatives and policies against forced labour. It pursues its own programmes in the field as well as monitors the progress of different governments. It has estimated the illegitimate profits from forced labour (\$150 billion in 2012); formulated new, internationally binding protocols aimed at advancing prevention, protection and compensation measures (2014); and is working on eradicating forced labour in supply chains in sectors such as the [garment industry](#). It also works with labour unions and civil society organisations on a global level and in countries across the world.

Nevertheless, there has been little or no progress in eradicating forced

labour worldwide. International organisations and most governments may now talk the talk, but how many truly walk the walk? In a few, exceptional cases something is happening. Brazil is a case in point. Many problems remain there, such as the condition of cane cutters in the sugar industry, as both Nicola Phillips and Ben Richardson report in this volume. Nevertheless, a combination of partial implementation of the anti-slavery legislation, partial land reform, social security programmes and increasing wages has had some impact. Another case is Nepal, where serious initiatives against forced labour within the *Tharu* community were undertaken within the context of heightened politicisation and a Maoist-inspired civil war. But even in these two countries forced labour persists, while elsewhere the impact of the ILO action on the ground is quite limited if felt at all.

Maybe it would be naïve to expect a UN organisation to be anything but fairly toothless. For the ILO, though, there is more to it. The ILO approaches forced labour as if it were completely separate from the economy and society at large, something that can be dealt with in isolation from wider issues. It acts as if such conditions emerge from processes somehow different from the more general processes that create low pay, long hours, arbitrary employment conditions, as well as silence the voices of labour and labour organisations. It makes no connection between forced labour today and processes of neoliberal capitalism or the absence of pro-labour governments. Forced labour can then be dealt with as a specific case, without upsetting the whole appletart of employment relations in export and domestic industries, the general absence of labour inspectors or the non-implementation of labour laws.

The ILO justifies its approach in a manner that would be approved of by the ghost of Adam Smith: forced labour is exploitation of labour but normal labour relations are not exploitative. Forced labour is when market mechanisms do not work, when labour is not sold at its value but force is employed. Unfortunately, forced labour cannot be

eradicated by following this logic. In many sectors, as well as in many countries, forced labour is a fairly natural part of labour relations. It is common to squeeze labour as much as possible, using as many means as possible, especially where the general balance of power in society allows for this. Labourers may experience force in a number of ways: it may be brutal and direct, leading to slave-like conditions. Or it can be more subtle, and be mixed with the general powerlessness of most poor people.

It has been shown time and again that large numbers of forced labourers enter into exploitative labour relations with open eyes. However squalid the conditions, however low the pay, and however harsh the abuse, they are aware of what they will suffer. This often happens without them being tricked into this and without them being put under direct non-economic force. Such groups include large groups of construction workers from Nepal working in Qatar, Indian domestic migrant brick kiln workers, and Bolivian forced labour garment workers in sweatshops in Brazil.

They do so because, sadly, this is their best possible option in a labour market where decent work is in short supply. What is on offer is a range of appalling jobs, some of which may be classified as forced labour but many others, to the extent they are available, are not much better. To take examples from the Delhi construction and garment sectors, forced overtime is common, safety regulations are absent, pay is below the minimum wage, employment is insecure, and private security firms make sure that no unions are present.

Without setting global and national limits for the exploitation of labourers by capital, without guaranteeing that poor people do not *need* to eke out an unacceptable existence as either nominally free or unfree labour, and without ensuring that alternatives to such work are available throughout the economy, people will continue to have to accept work even under the conditions of forced labour.

Until these root causes are addressed, the ILO strategy of prevention, detection and rehabilitation will not work. Sadly there is little chance that this will change in the foreseeable future. The ILO is the only tripartite UN organisation, with equal representation from governments, organised labour and employers. Employers, seeking to forestall anything that disturbs 'ordinary' employment relations or questions the general absence of decent work under neoliberalism in the South, fight tooth and nail to keep the forced labour issue in its box. While the labour unions in the ILO may want to change this, it has so far proved impossible.

The ILO's high profile on forced labour issues has probably enabled other activists in countries across the globe to take bolder action, gaining legitimacy from the ILO policy. However, real change will only happen when matters are taken beyond what the ILO is currently willing and able to achieve.

What would loosen the roots of labour exploitation in supply chains?

Forced labour is a symptom of a wider malaise facing workers in global supply chains. Governance gaps and skewed business structures are exacerbating inequality and must be tackled for workers to be properly protected.

Rachel Wilshaw

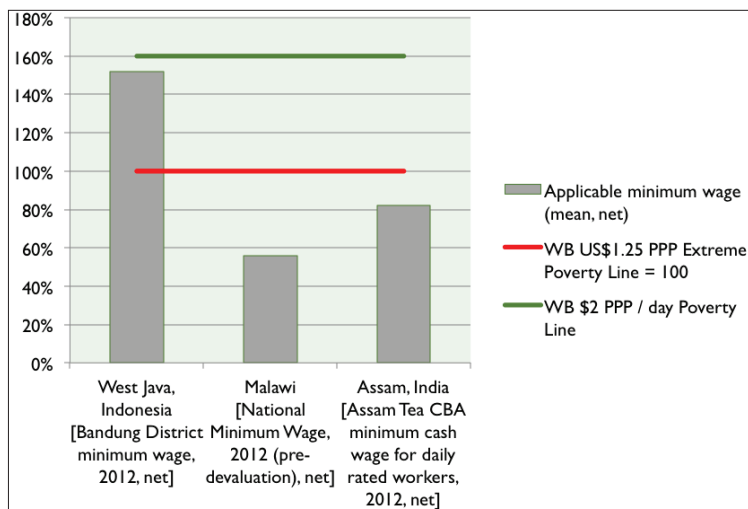
“Revealed: Asian slave labour producing prawns for supermarkets in US, UK”, ran one of the many headlines in the last year that linked the UK to violations of labour rights in global supply chains. Others highlighted child labour in our chocolate, trafficking in our tea and slavery in cotton. There are more cases, of course, these just attract headlines because they involve consumer brands.

The stream of exposés is difficult to square with corporate sustainability reports, which tend to focus on environmental metrics and highlight success stories. In sectors with systemic labour issues, social compliance programmes and corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects are currently akin to pruning a field of weeds, while leaving the roots undisturbed.

Low wages, job insecurity and absence of worker representation were key findings from three recent Oxfam studies conducted with companies, including a [study of labour standards in Unilever’s Vietnam supply chain](#), a [study with IPL in Kenyan flowers and green beans](#) and a [study with Ethical Tea Partnership into tea pickers’ wages in three countries](#). The latter found that wages were below the poverty line in Assam (India) and below the extreme poverty line in Malawi, despite meeting legal minima and providing in-kind benefits, as shown below.

Based on its research, Oxfam developed the concept of a ‘Work Spec-

Figure: Value of minimum wage rates set by national or district governments in each research area compared to international poverty lines (3 unit household with one earner)



Source: *Understanding Wage Issues in the Tea Industry*, a report by Oxfam and Ethical Tea Partnership published in May 2013, with IDH and Ergon Associates.

trum' for its new briefing paper *Steps towards a living wage in global supply chains*. At one end of the spectrum sits forced labour which 'does harm' to workers and is clearly illegal. The next column contains 'low-road' jobs that trap millions of workers in poverty. Wages may be legal but they are very low, contracts are insecure, hours are excessive, and there is no worker representation. Next are 'medium road' jobs which 'do some good' and finally 'high road' jobs which 'do good': they provide secure work on a living wage with good worker representation. Oxfam is particularly concerned about the 'low road' jobs, often held by women, which provide no net benefit to families or communities yet are proudly reported by business as 'providing jobs'.

A 2014 media expose in *The Observer* linked the very low wages in Assam's tea industry to the trafficking of teenage girls into domestic

servitude. That same year Nazdeek, an Indian NGO, [expressed its outrage](#) that a new wage settlement is below the legal minimum wage. When workers cannot work their way out of poverty however hard they work, as here, household members are much more vulnerable to trafficking and child labour.

Governance gaps

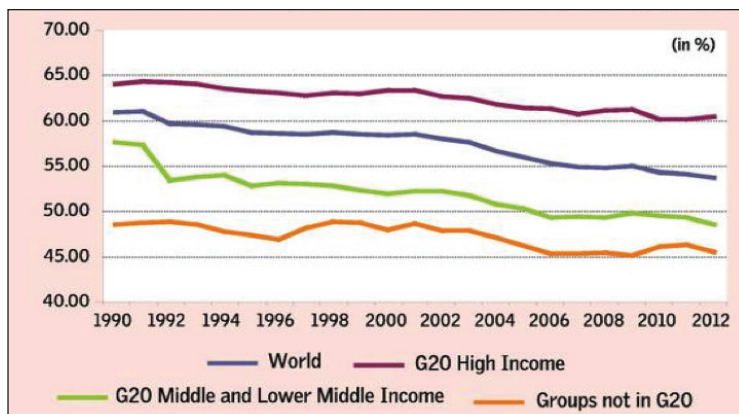
We can't get a handle on forced labour and 'low road' jobs without understanding the governance gaps and business structures that allow them to thrive. Governance gaps have opened up because labour regulation is national but the market place is global, and governments (of all persuasions) are prepared to sacrifice the labour standards of their citizens in a 'race to the bottom' for trade and investment.

Under the prevailing business model of shareholder ownership, powerful shareholders and executives extract profit from value chains in the short term by taking an excessive share of income for themselves while pushing cost and risk down onto the most vulnerable. In Asia's garment industries, for example, wages have declined in real terms in the last decade, while during the same period the [incomes of the UK's top CEOs doubled to £4.25 million](#).

Governance gaps and skewed business structures constitute a perfect recipe for growing economic inequality. The report that launched Oxfam's global campaign to tackle this, [Even it Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality](#), showed that over the last 25 years income from labour has made up a declining share of gross domestic product (GDP) across low-, middle- and high-income countries alike. Around the world, ordinary workers are taking home an ever-dwindling slice of the pie, while those at the top take more and more.

As business and a wealthy elite increase their power, they often wield their influence with governments by lobbying to keep regulation light, in a process known as 'political capture'. In the last month *The Guard-*

Figure: Share of labour income in GDP for country groups



Source: Global & Local Economic Review; an elaboration from data generated by the UN Global Policy Model (2013), reproduced in Oxfam's report *Even it Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality* (2014).

ian has highlighted [lobbying in the US against rises in the minimum wage](#), and research by [Spinwatch](#) that 300 staff working for British peers and MPs have lobbying interests, whose activities continue to be hidden from public view.

What needs to change for workers to be properly protected?

Some developments point the way:

- **Governments raising the minimum wage:** Brazil raised its minimum wage by nearly 50 percent in real terms between 1995 and 2011, and poverty and inequality duly fell in step.
- **Unions negotiating sector agreements:** fast food workers flipping burgers for McDonalds and Burger King earn \$20 an hour in Denmark as against \$8.90 in the US, as the Danish workers are protected by a sector collective bargaining agreement.

- **Employers choosing to pay a living wage:** over 1000 companies and charities have been accredited as living wage employers in the UK (including 21 of the FTSE 100, up from two in 2012).
- **Lobbying to raise the playing field:** In 2014, following months of unrest in Cambodia, eight garment brands wrote to the government promising to factor higher wages into their pricing; two months later, the government raised the minimum wage by 28 percent. In the UK, joint [advocacy led by Ethical Trading Initiative](#) led the government to include a 'transparency in supply chains' clause in the draft Modern Slavery Bill.
- **Driving a race to the top:** Oxfam's '[Behind the Brands](#)' campaign has prised policy commitments out of global food and beverage brands and onto their websites, giving the public and investors rare comparative information on how companies approach systemic issues in their supply chains.

But for value in global trade to be shared more equitably, exploitation to be penalised and good quality jobs to become the norm, two other changes stand out as being needed:

1. **A normative framework for 'decent work':** At a high policy level, there is no 'normative framework' for decent work, including a living wage. This would include principles and key performance indicators that enjoy wide acceptance, which would generate positive change in businesses and guide investor decision-making. Examples include representation of workers on compensation committees, measures of a living wage in supply chains, rewards for direct employment and penalties linked to an 'exploiter pays' principle.
2. **More meaningful corporate reporting:** There is a need for published, evidence-based analyses of political social and economic

issues by sector and country. These would be undertaken by professional researchers, such as universities, with input from civil society organisations. Placed in the public domain, they would act as an information baseline against which corporate sustainability reports could be judged. This would encourage companies to be more honest in their reporting and more collaborative in addressing root causes, enabling stakeholders to separate green-wash from genuine progress.

In summary, forced labour is a symptom of a wider malaise in workplaces across global supply chains. Governance gaps and skewed business structures are exacerbating inequality and must be tackled for workers to be properly protected. An accepted normative framework for decent work and better corporate reporting are urgently needed.

Basic income and the anti-slavery movement

Unconditional basic income is not only feasible, but it also has more emancipatory potential than any other single policy because it targets economic vulnerability, the heart of all labour exploitation.

Neil Howard

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that the emerging global anti-slavery movement risks becoming no more than a fig leaf for structural political-economic injustice. I suggested that unless it faces that injustice head-on, it will waste a generational opportunity to make the world more just, focussing instead on making consumers and activists “feel better about feeling bad.”

It doesn't have to be this way. There is an alternative, and it starts with advocating for [unconditional basic income](#) as a genuine anti-slavery strategy. Only a universal basic income will truly eliminate the economic vulnerability that lies at the root of [all labour exploitation](#).

Slavery and the market

Slavery, like trafficking and forced labour, is primarily a [market phenomenon](#). Although often depicted as outside of market relations, the reality is that markets create both supplies of vulnerable workers and demand for their labour. When a worker finds herself in conditions of extreme exploitation, it is almost always the result of her economic vulnerability coinciding with an employer's demand for her labour.

This happens because, in market societies, the freedom to refuse any job is the flip-side of the [freedom to starve](#) unless you accept one. Unless you are independently wealthy, you have to work to survive. For the very poor, where [margins are matters of life and death](#), the price of saying no to even an awful employer is often too high to pay.

This is why ‘market-friendly’ policies will **never be enough** to abolish ‘modern-day slavery’. Market-friendly policies do not fundamentally alter the balance of power between the economically weak and the economically strong. They rely on either goodwill or police enforcement, persuading employers to ‘behave better’, consumers to shop more ethically, and police forces to root out bad apples. But these policies do nothing about the economic compulsion that renders the poorest vulnerable to malevolent employers adept at evading the authorities.

Basic income

So what is to be done? The one single policy that has most emancipatory potential is the unconditional basic income (UBI). UBI has a long and respected pedigree. Thomas Paine advocated **a version of it** at the dawn of the American Revolution, and it has had modern supporters ranging from **Bertrand Russell** to **John Rawls**.

The idea is as simple as it is **brilliant**: give every citizen an amount of money sufficient to guarantee their survival without any strings attached. You receive it just by virtue of **being a citizen**. It will never make you rich, but it will always prevent you from going hungry, or from having to sell yourself into slavery-like labour for want of a better alternative.

When people are first pitched UBI, their gut reaction is to often ask, “is this feasible?” “Won’t everybody just stop working?” These concerns are understandable, but they are also misplaced.

With regards to feasibility, there are two major points. The first is that the economic viability of such a method of wealth redistribution has already been proved in principle by Great Britain itself. Indeed, the welfare state operates on the very same basis, taxing progressively to distribute wealth more evenly.

Second, UBI is likely to be far **cheaper and more efficient** than any

other existing system of social protection. Currently, governments everywhere waste billions of dollars on policies that fail to reach the most vulnerable. In the West, expensive means-testing [excludes](#) many of those most in need, while governments subsidise [poverty wages](#) and give [tax breaks to corporations](#). In the Global South, fuel and agricultural subsidies frequently [fail to reach their intended targets](#) as corrupt bureaucrats siphon money to buy political influence. Under these circumstances, the costs of distributing a basic income directly to people will be offset by reducing other, less efficient programmes and cutting out the dead weight of political middlemen.

Will people work if they receive a UBI? Of course they will. Very few are satisfied with simple subsistence; almost everyone wants to improve at least the lives of their children. No advocate of basic income wants it set high enough to discourage work. Rather, the goal is to give people the “[real freedom](#)” to say *No!* to bad jobs and *Yes!* to good ones. Remember that in the West, it is the punitive social security system which itself creates unemployment traps. If instead of tax-breaks or top-ups we gave people UBI, then nobody would ever face the choice of losing money by accepting work.

UBI has benefits beyond these practical fundamentals, and for the first time in history, we now have [detailed empirical evidence from a developing country](#) to show it. UNICEF has just completed a pilot project with the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India to trial UBI among thousands of villagers in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The findings are electric.

First, they show an *increase* in economic activity, with new small-scale businesses springing up, *more* work being performed, and more equipment and livestock being purchased for the local economy. Second, those receiving UBI registered improvements in child nutrition, school attendance and performance, health and healthcare, sanitation and housing. Greater benefits were recorded for women than for men

(as women's financial and social autonomy were increased), for the disabled than for others, and for the poorest vis-à-vis the wealthy.

But there is a third dimension that should really make the anti-slavery movement sit up and take note. This is the 'emancipatory dimension'. The economic security provided by UBI not only increased the political participation of the poor, as it gave them the time and resources necessary to represent their interests against the powerful. It also *freed them from the clutches of moneylenders*. As the author of the UNICEF study [puts it](#):

Money is a scarce commodity in Indian villages and this drives up the price. Moneylenders and landlords can easily put villagers into debt bondage and charge exorbitant rates of interest that families cannot hope to pay off.

Unless, of course, they benefit from UBI, in which case they have the liquidity necessary to maintain their freedom even in the case of economic shocks.

Historical potential

The contemporary anti-slavery movement stands at the forefront of a critical historical juncture. In the context of global economic crisis, the old social models [are breaking down](#) but the new are [not yet ready to be born](#). Into this vacuum we've seen the rise of serious labour exploitation, along with political and consumer activism in response.

At the vanguard of this response stand the modern abolitionists, and they do so with unrivalled discursive power. Nobody that has a place at the table is *for* slavery: everybody is against it. This is why the call of abolitionists to end 'modern-day slavery' within a generation goes entirely opposed. It garners allies ranging from the global [business elite](#) to [the Pope himself](#). More than 50,000 people a week a sign up to [Walk Free's](#) Global Movement, and over the past several years we have wit-

nessed a tidal wave of pressure to crack down on extreme exploitation.

So what does all this mean? It means that today's abolitionists stand on the verge of a once-in-a-century opportunity. They can play it safe and advocate the market-friendly policies that will—at best—tidy up around the edges. Or they can go big, they can go revolutionary, and they can organise a global shift in the direction of social justice.

Let us be clear: UBI is not merely the most effective tool for abolishing modern-day slavery. It is a tool for radical social justice, for changing the economic game entirely, by emancipating *all of us* from economic vulnerability. If modern abolitionists have a historic mission, it is to complete the task of their predecessors: they must make freedom not just legal, but feasible.

Forced labour is big business: states and corporations are doing little to stop it

The recent flurry of government, corporate, and NGO initiatives to eradicate slavery does little to tackle underlying causes. Until this changes, severe exploitation will thrive in the global economy.

Genevieve LeBaron and Neil Howard

Forced labour is often described as an isolated crime perpetuated by ‘[unscrupulous](#)’ employers. But it is more systemic than many governments, businesses, and anti-slavery organisations want to believe.

While unethical labour recruiters and bad apple employers certainly do not help, the much bigger, structural problem is the unfair global economic system in which they operate. To genuinely understand why forced labor is thriving today, we need to understand how the *system* works, and the role that businesses and states play in fostering an economic and political context that individuals can exploit with impunity.

We can begin to understand forced labour’s role in this system by thinking in terms of [supply and demand](#). In the age of neoliberal globalisation, certain types of businesses ‘need’ forced labour to safeguard their profits or their market share. For this reason, as Andrew Crane explains, some businesses “[attempt to underprice a key resource \(labor\) through illegitimate means](#).” At the same time, large swathes of the poor ‘need’ awful jobs to safeguard their survival, and they frequently find their exit from those jobs blocked (creating a common scenario of forced labour). The former expresses the demand, while the latter *are* the supply.

Precise business dynamics vary by industry. In sugar, for instance, cane producers use bonded labour or excessive overtime to maintain the crop’s [low market price](#). While in electronics manufacturing, where

studies show [high proportions of workers](#) are subject to some form of forced labour, factories turn to debt-bonded migrant workers hired through intermediaries to meet customer orders.

Yet similarities exist *across* different commodities and supply chains. Evidence from a range of contexts suggests that lead firms across a broad range of industries tacitly rely on forced labour to make their products, despite supplier codes of conduct or CSR claims to the contrary.

Paying suppliers [fiercely low prices](#), demanding goods too [quickly](#) or on short notice, and chronically [delaying payments](#) all foster reliance on exploited labour, including unprotected agency workers, as well as forced, bonded, or child labour. This is particularly acute at [lower tiers of the supply chain](#) and [along the labour supply chain](#), where enforcement of labor standards is especially minimal.

In short, while global supply chains produce unprecedented profits—increasingly concentrated at the very top—they do so at a serious cost to workers. This is why Benjamin Selwyn claims that supply chains should be viewed “not as benign spheres of opportunity, but as tools for increasing the exploitation of labour.”

Why are so many people ‘available’ to be exploited in this fashion? A crucial part of the answer lies in the [neoliberal policies](#) that have been widely demonstrated to foster inequality and insecurity, and to entrench poverty and exclusion. As welfare states have been rolled back and the guarantee of regular employment or social protection has been diminished, more and more of the world’s people are forced to become what Nicola Phillips refers to as “the working poor.” Survival has been ‘marketised’, and when survival is only possible through money and markets, people with few options have to accept whatever the market has to offer.

In contrast to the dominant market thinking which attributes this to abstract economic forces, we hold it to be a fundamentally *political* state of affairs. As the actors ultimately responsible for setting the rules of the game, governments and big businesses are not merely guilty of complicity in the existence of forced labour, but of *actively creating* the very conditions that make it possible.

As Rachel Wilshaw and her OXFAM colleagues make clear, when inequality rises, so too does the likelihood of [state capture by elite business interests](#). The more wealth concentrates at the very top, the more those at the very top are able to influence states to promote policies that protect profits over people. Thus we now witness social spending slashed to pay for corporate tax breaks. We have a proliferation of ‘light-touch’ labour regulations that, among other things, replace ‘expensive’ [labour inspection](#) with the ‘cheaper’ option of letting businesses take charge of protecting workers’ rights. And we have the creation of bonded labour pools in the form of temporary foreign work programmes, such as the ones documented by Susan Ferguson and David McNally.

We must assess existing anti-slavery or anti-forced labour strategies within this context rather than outside of it. The governance initiatives currently in place—ranging from private mechanisms like auditing to public initiatives like transparency legislation—simply fail to confront the underlying causes. Indeed, a common feature across the full spectrum of recent initiatives championed by states, corporations, and NGOs is that they leave the [business models](#) that give rise to forced labour fully intact. At the same time, they do very little to challenge the inequality and poverty that guarantees a supply of workers needy enough to accept dreadful working conditions.

Thus, while many corporations’ supply chain initiatives focus on identifying and preventing forced labour through ‘ethical’ compliance auditing, none that we have seen attempt to reduce suppliers’ reliance on

forced labour by paying them more, or by putting a stop to their use of labour market intermediaries. *So long as price, contract length, and the dynamics of labour subcontracting remain off the table for change, such initiatives will do little to tackle the relations of power and production that give rise to forced labour in the first place.*

The same is true for government efforts. Many states have recently passed national action plans and legislation to eradicate forced labour. Although these initiatives seek to harmonise government agencies to better identify and prosecute incidents of forced labour, as well as to raise the criminal justice consequences for individual perpetrators, they have done little to alter the broader political economic context in which such crimes emerge and thrive. None do anything whatsoever to address chronic economic insecurity. Is it any wonder, then, that Jens Lerche laments that “there has been little or no progress in eradicating forced labour worldwide?”

It's time to stop tinkering around the edges and to move towards more systemic solutions to these problems. These need to be centred around redistribution of value, both within and along the supply chain, and within society more broadly. Neil Howard puts forth a powerful case for the consideration of Unconditional Basic Income as a structural strategy to address and prevent severe labour exploitation. Doubtless, there are other bold and creative solutions. The point is that we need to start working towards these, and stop reinforcing the status quo.

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There is a growing and sober awareness among international policymakers and within global civil society that human trafficking, slavery and forced labour are not anomalies perpetuated by a few 'bad apple' employers. Rather, such severe labour exploitation is an endemic feature of the contemporary global economy. This edited collection brings together some of the sharpest minds from the worlds of academia and activism to investigate and shed light on the root causes of this exploitation. Its essays analyse how business demand for forced labour manifests in certain industries, as well as how political and economic factors combine to generate a supply of workers vulnerable to abuse. Written in intelligent yet accessible prose, it represents a key resource for policy, activism and research.

"The team at Beyond Trafficking and Slavery do incredible work to advance public debate around trafficking, slavery and forced labour. The site has already become the go-to source for campaigners, workers organisations, and students. They are a major ally in our effort to protect workers' and migrants' rights, and to resist the spread of market fundamentalism."

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—*Helga Konrad, former OSCE Special Representative
for the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons*

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